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Judith L. Wolf

Transitions in Parenting among Somali Refugee and Immigrant Families:
Acculturation in the U.S. and the Preservation of Traditional Culture and Values

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the changing experience of family life, acculturation, and preservation of traditional collectivist culture among Somali refugee and immigrant parents raising children in the United States. Resettlement in the U.S. forced many Somali refugees to transition to a new individualistic culture of family values markedly different from their own. Nine Somali refugee and immigrant mothers and fathers residing in Connecticut and western Massachusetts participated in the research. They answered open-ended interview questions focusing on the following topics: 1) Somali parenting styles and values, 2) the preservation of Somali language, identity, and Islam, 3) changes in family systems, regarding gender roles and extended family and 4) familial conflict resolution. The findings demonstrated that the greatest challenges to parenting centered on loneliness, social isolation, and lack of support from extended family and neighbors. All participants focused on children's lack of respect for elders and diminishing parental authority as fundamental differences between American and Somali values. Most regretted their limitations in passing along Somali language and Islamic study. The findings also showed that many participants transitioned to a new acceptance of their children's autonomy and identity as American, thereby meaningfully integrating American and Somali values. Many affirmed that a traditional Somali council of elders functioned in their current community as a model for familial conflict mediation more familiar than therapy. These findings help build cultural competency and

trust by informing social workers, educators, and other service providers of the strengths and challenges that Somali refugee and immigrant families may face in the process of acculturation.

TRANSITIONS IN PARENTING AMONG SOMALI REFUGEE AND IMMIGRANT
FAMILIES: ACCULTURATION IN THE U.S. AND THE PRESERVATION OF
TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND VALUES

A project based upon an independent investigation
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2010
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore the changing experience of family life, acculturation process of adaptation to western individualistic values, and the preservation and transmission of traditional collectivist culture across generations among Somali refugees raising children in the United States. Resettlement in the U.S. has forced many Somali refugees to transition to a new culture of family values and parenting styles, markedly different from their home culture. In particular, changes also occur regarding the methods for resolving family conflicts. In traditional Somali culture, grandparents, aunts and uncles engage and intervene actively in family matters between husbands and wives and parents and children. Consultation with a group of elders who have earned status of wisdom and honor within the community is a traditionally common method of dispute negotiation, more familiar than western therapy.

One reason for conducting this study had to do with the growing presence of Somali refugee communities in the United States. Increased cultural sensitivity and cultural competency in social work practice lead to improvements in effectively serving Somali refugee communities. Somali refugees are among the newest, youngest, and poorest of immigrant populations entering the United States (Refugee Resettlement Watch, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Center for Disease Control, 55,036 Somali refugees resettled in the U.S. from 1983 – 2004, with 60% having entered since 2000

(<http://www.cdc.gov/tb/publications/guidestoolkits/EthnographicGuides/Somalia/chapters/chapter1.pdf>). The Somali civil war that began in 1988 led to widespread violence and death, forcing the displacement of millions of Somalis to refugee camps in neighboring countries. In 2000, The Department of State, in conjunction with a variety of voluntary agencies, coordinated the resettlement of the Somali Bantu clan to cities throughout the U.S., providing assistance with literacy and job training and basic immediate needs. The Somali Bantu clan represents an oppressed and enslaved minority of herdsmen from a pastoral society. Islam is the religion of 99% of Somalis, including the Bantu. This study focused on the Somali Bantu refugee community which resettled in the West Springfield area of Massachusetts through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts.

While ultimately grateful for security and opportunities in the West, Somali Bantu refugees may face challenges related to acculturation, cultural continuity and preservation. Many Somali refugees and immigrants experience changes in family systems that conflict with traditional values of a collectivist society. For example, displacement, resettlement, and transition to western society both require and allow women to take on more responsibilities for earning money, thus diminishing men's role as providers (Koshen, H. 2007). Additionally, immigrant children gain English language competency more swiftly than parents, and consequently assume more independence and autonomy, which may weaken parental authority (Koshen, H. 2007). Frequently, kinship links of grandparents, aunts and uncles who traditionally played a vital role in child-rearing and decision-making may lose their place in the family system.

Furthermore, traditional models for responding to conflicts within a family differ fundamentally from the Western counseling and therapy strategies employed in the United States. As in many non-Western cultures, the concept of exposing family problems to outsiders typically raises distrust and skepticism. Therapy as a form of healing is an inherently foreign concept to African immigrants (Nwadiora, E. 1996). In contrast to the therapeutic models of clinicians in the U.S., the Somali Bantu community relies on its unique model for conflict resolution through a group of men who serve as community leaders, known as the *council of elders*. Clan elders have, for centuries, served an integral governmental role in Somalia in negotiating peace, compensation, and the sharing of resources between clans in conflict as well as managing land disputes and family law, and justice (Koshen, 2007). Based on Islamic law, known as *Shari'ah*, this form of government and rule has been passed down orally for generations, often through the medium of recitation of poetry (Koshen, 2007).

In the West Springfield area, a comparable group of community leaders convenes to respond to contemporary issues. Whereas traditional issues of clan and land disputes are not relevant in America, the council meets regularly as a source of mediation and support in response to conflicts that arise among individuals and families. For example, the council collects money from community members to serve as a safety net as needed for financial support of those in crisis. If community members find themselves in a medical or housing emergency, for example, the council may provide for their needs. This function corresponds to a fundamental traditional value of Somali culture and Islam known as *zakat*, which refers to charity and caring for those in need (Koshen, 2007). This council of elders serving the Somali Bantu community of West Springfield offers a

valuable opportunity to study the way in which such a model of conflict negotiation and preservation of cultural values functions in the U.S.

I conducted a qualitative, exploratory study using flexible methods through interviews with nine Somali refugee and immigrant parents from Springfield, Massachusetts and Hartford, Connecticut to explore the ways in which family systems shift, with changing roles for men, women, parents, children, and extended family members. Semi-structured, open-ended questions elicited narrative, in-depth descriptions of the challenges and strengths of Somali Bantu refugee parents and communities. Narrative research methods were appropriate for data collection because of the highly oral nature of Somali society. A qualitative research design was warranted in order to deeply probe the subjective experience of Somali refugee parents and the ways in which they make meaning of parenting in the U.S. The questions contained in the interview guide are open-ended to elicit narrative responses that describe, in depth, the challenges, shifts, changes, and transitions of parenting styles among Somali Bantu immigrants.

As the number of Somali refugees immigrating to the United States continues to grow, service providers must learn to skillfully adapt to the needs of this population with cultural sensitivity and competency. School counselors and educators will more effectively serve this community with a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, strengths, and values of Somali refugee families. Understanding the inherent strengths of Somali family support networks and community support systems rooted in councils of elders helps bridge the work of professionals and traditional models of support. Earning the trust of Somali parents is fundamental to successfully working with their children. Parental involvement along with cultural continuity corresponds to greater

success among immigrant children (Obiakor, 2007). From a stance of respect for cultural continuity and mutual trust, professionals may support parents and children with empathic attunement and a meaningful integration of traditional values with life in the United States. The less immigrant children struggle with cultural discontinuity, the more secure they may be in their social identity and the more they will feel a sense of belonging within the larger American society.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review focuses on previous research related to the question: How do Somali refugee and immigrant families acculturate in the U.S. while preserving and transmitting traditional culture and values to their children? The first section of this chapter presents the historical background of Somali refugees, civil war, displacement, and resettlement patterns. The second section describes traditional Somali family values, particularly concerning parenting, in the context of a collectivist society. Traditional Somali parenting styles, shaped by a collectivist orientation are compared with typical western, American individualistic values. This includes the role of intergenerational and collective kinship parenting and of elders for decision-making and negotiating familial and community conflict. The third section addresses the ways in which displacement and resettlement alter traditional roles and responsibilities of family members and impact cultural continuity. The fourth section explores traditional Somali philosophy and practice regarding mental health and the expression and resolution of conflict, and implication for western therapeutic interventions. The final section addresses the relevance of this research to social work practice and the need for further study of Somali immigrant transitions in parenting, acculturation, and cultural continuity.

Historical Background of Somali Civil War and Displacement

Somalia is located on the Horn of Africa, on the east coast, bordering Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. While Somalia is described as a homogenous society, it has, for centuries, been divided into clusters of clans and organized according to clan affiliation. The clan groups, formed along geographical areas, are fundamental to Somali identity and considered to be extensions of the family (Bhui, Craig, Mohamud, Warfa, Stansfeld, Thornicroft, Curtis, & McCrone, 2006, & Dybdahl & Hundeide, 1998). The Bantu clan is historically a sedentary community situated in agricultural villages where men and, in some cases, women work on farms. In contrast, non-Bantu Somali clans are generally pastoral herders (Bhui et.al., 1998). As descendents of slaves from Tanzania and northern Mozambique, the Bantu have historically represented the most vulnerable and oppressed clan, a marginalized and persecuted minority in Somalia. Their slave lineage restricted them from equal representation in politics and access to services and opportunities. Discrimination by other Somali clans prevailed against the Bantu in pre Civil War Somalia and in Kenyan refugee camps (Eno & Lehman, 2002).

The Somali Bantu are mainly moderate Sunni Muslims (Eno & Lehman, 2002). Somali Bantu religious lifestyle is considered relatively liberal in comparison with Somali society in general. Although it is common for Somali Bantu immigrant women in the United States to dress modestly and wear the *hijab* (head covering), Somali Bantu women in Africa generally participate publicly in the community through farm work in the fields in contrast to more restrictive religious practice confining women exclusively to the home (Eno & Lehman, 2002).

In the late nineteenth century, Britain established control over northern Somalia. Italy took control of eastern, southern and central Somalia by the late 1920's. The Bantu clan remained enslaved to non-Bantu Somalis and other Africans and Arabs until Italian law abolished slavery in Somalia in the 1930's. However, the Italian colonists brutally coerced and exploited the Bantu into forced farm labor on Italian plantations (Eno & Lehman, 2002). In 1960, the northern and southern regions of Somalia gained independence from European colonial rule and united as the Somali Republic. Over the course of the next three decades, political unrest and clan rivalries escalated into civil war (Eno & Lehman, 2002).

President Siad Barre fled Somalia in 1991, leaving the country without any central formal government or law enforcement. The ensuing widespread anarchy and violence, which continues to the present day, led to the death of at least 400,000 Somalis and the displacement of at least 45% of the population to neighboring countries (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). Beginning in 1992, millions of Somalis were forced to flee to refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia. Somali refugees endured the trauma of violence and loss within their homeland as well as the hardship of refugee camps in neighboring countries. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) established four refugee camps in Kenya which served over 160,000 refugees at their height in 2003 (Eno & Lehman, 2002 & Abdi, 2008).

In response to this international humanitarian crisis and in partnership with UNHCR, the United States government's resettlement program settled thousands of Somalis throughout the U.S. (Somali Development Center of New Hampshire, <http://www.sdc-nh.org/aboutus.html>). A report by Jewish Family Services of Western

Massachusetts (JFSWM) in May, 2003 stated that 12,000 Somali Bantus were expected to resettle in about forty-five cities throughout the United States, aided in this process by nine national voluntary agencies, including the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) (Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts, 2003). HIAS supported Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts in the creation of the Greater Springfield Preferred Community Partnership for Refugee Resettlement to provide mental and physical health services, ESL, employment services and skill training, public school enrollment, and serve as liaisons with schools and other community organizations about Somali Bantu community (Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts, 2003). JFSWM resettled a total of 139 Somali Bantus made up of twenty seven families between the years 2003 and 2005 (Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts, 2003). The historical context of violence and loss impacts the experience of Somali Bantu resettlement to the United States and adjustment to this foreign culture. Many Somali Bantu refugees were forced to resettle without immediate and extended family members who perished or remained in Africa. Resettlement projects made efforts to group kinship communities together so that families and neighbors would remain in the same geographic area, as was the case for Somali Bantu refugees who were resettled by Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts in Springfield, Massachusetts (Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts, 2003). This plan allowed for a degree of community cohesion, although most Somali Bantu families transitioned to the United States amid profound loss. Eno and Lehman (2002) confirmed the challenges of Somali Bantu refugee women in particular:

Female circumcision, rape, a lack of education, second-class status in Somali society, high birth rates, single parent status, and trauma from past experiences are all conditions that Bantu women have had to endure in Africa. In the United States, the Bantu women will be further challenged if they cannot draw upon their extended family and kin networks to assist them with child rearing and moral support. Providing the Bantu women with appropriate social services and ensuring as much as possible that people belonging to the same social support network are resettled in the same geographic location will assist them in their transition to American society (Eno & Lehman, 2002).

As families adapt to life within American society, they may encounter challenges in sustaining connection to their heritage for themselves and the next generation, given the history of displacement and exile, along with contrasting cultural values.

Parenting Styles and Family Values in Collectivist and Individualist Societies

Cross-cultural psychology, in recent decades, views cultural differences through the lens of collectivist versus individualist societies. These terms refer to the nature of relationships between individuals and their communities. Collectivism, typical of nonwestern cultures, and individualism, typical of the United States and the West, emphasize distinct values and goals that have particular implications for parenting. *Collectivist* cultures tend to more highly value interdependence and caring for group and family members whereas *individualist* cultures prioritize autonomy and freedom to pursue self interest (Arends-Togh & Van de Vijver, 2008). In collectivist societies, individual interests must be subordinated to the betterment of the group. Collectivist cultures view selfishness as socially unacceptable and prohibit behavior that threatens the collective.

Societies transmit cultural values across generations through the process of socialization. Exploring the way families shape children's behavior clarifies the values

and culture of the community. In collectivist societies, it is essential, above all, to teach children to achieve group harmony. Despite the uniqueness of societies throughout the world, these values prioritizing family and community loyalty and obligation may be generalized globally across collectivist cultures. For example, in traditional Chinese collectivistic culture, “maintaining harmonious relationships with others is an index of individual social maturity” and considered ideal for achieving mental health (Chen, 2000, p. 332). Controlling and thwarting individuality is prized in the service of developing cooperation skills. Harmonious interpersonal relationships serve as a protective factor and ultimately benefit individuals’ psychological well-being and support adaptive coping amidst adversity.

In individualist societies, parents typically highly value autonomy. The capacity to reason and negotiate, which fosters autonomy, is considered useful for successful socialization in individualistic cultures such as the United States. In contrast, learning to be independent, self-sufficient, and autonomous are not necessarily preferred assets for young people growing up in collectivist societies. Respect for authority, obedience, self-restraint, interconnectedness, and cooperation are highly praised in collectivist societies in general and African societies in particular. In collectivist cultures, children find self-worth, value, and social success through meeting the needs of others. Parents achieve these goals through keeping close physical contact with young children, thereby fostering strong emotional bonds. Children are socialized to cultivate self-restraint and minimize self-assertion (Rudy, Grusec, & Wolfe, 1999). Individuals achieve fulfillment by aligning themselves with a larger social group and relying on the group to attend to their needs (Rudy et al. 1999). Deference to authority and suppression of self-interest are also

highly valued as a way of teaching children how to adapt well in a collectivist culture.

“Authoritarian parenting, which emphasizes the child’s inhibition of his or her own needs and unquestioning compliance with parental demands, may be an effective means of helping children to learn these skills” (Rudy, et. al., 1999, p. 303).

In Chinese culture, aggressive, disruptive behavior in children may be viewed as more problematic than it would be in individualist societies because it could threaten group functioning (Chen, 2000). The contrast between socialization responses to timid, inhibited temperaments among Chinese children and children from individualist cultures exemplifies the different meanings societies construct of children’s behavior. Among western individualist parents, these qualities are discouraged in favor of assertiveness. However, in traditional Chinese society, inhibited, shy, and wary temperaments in children combined with highly protective and directive parenting serve to support adaptive development and future success of children (Chen, 2000).

The cultural context plays an essential role in making meaning of different parenting styles. Rudy, Grusec, & Wolfe (1999) distinguish between the impact of authoritarian versus authoritative parenting on children’s emotional and social development based on whether the society they live in is collectivist or individualist. For example, according to their findings, an authoritarian may be associated with negative practices in the individualist culture of the United States, but has no such negative connotations in a collectivist society (Rudy, et. al., 1999). Parental intrusiveness and control, associated with authoritarian parenting, are generally viewed as negative in European American families but positive among African American and Latino families (Chase-Lansdale, D’Angelo & Palacios, 2007). Chase-Lansdale and colleagues found

that Latino mothers prioritize “obedience and politeness, exercise discipline more often . . . and . . . emphasize connectedness over autonomy development” (Chase-Lansdale et. al., 2007, p. 146). In the case of Mexican American and Puerto Rican families, this parenting style is linked with parent-child attunement and positive social and emotional development among children (Chase-Lansdale et. al., 2007).

Based on studies by Ispa, Fine, Halgunseth, Harper, Robinson, & Boyce (2004) of maternal intrusiveness, warmth, and mother-toddler relationships across cultures and socioeconomic groups, families make meaning of these parenting styles according to cultural context. “Ispa and colleagues propose that in collectivistic cultures, such as those from which Latino parents descend, authoritarian parenting is practiced intentionally and less negatively compared to authoritarian parents in mainstream America where individualism dominates the culture” (Lindsay in Lansford, 2007, p. 146). A study of Latino immigrant families by Aronson Fontes (2002) found traditional authoritarian parenting styles, even including corporal punishment, to be practiced by devoted parents who also offered intimacy, love and support. These studies show that parental control has different meaning across cultures. This depends on the degree that it is normative within the culture, and how children perceive parental motivation for control. Parental control is more detrimental when it emerges out of resentment and feels to children like rejection. It is more acceptable when children perceive it as intended to protect them for their own good. “Parental control may be accompanied by negative feelings in individualistic cultures. . . but neutral or positive feelings in more collectivistic cultures such as that of Mexican Americans who still hold to traditional Mexican values” (Ispa, et. al., 2004, p. 1627). Their study shows positive correlation between

intrusiveness and stress within families only for European American mothers (Isapa, et. al., 2004, p. 1627).

However, Chen's (2000) studies show that children universally respond to parental acceptance and rejection similarly, regardless of the different meanings these parenting styles hold across cultures. ". . . Parental authoritarian and authoritative parenting practices and parental acceptance and rejection serve virtually identical functions for child social, school, and psychological adjustment in Chinese and Western cultures" (Chen, Cong, & Zhou, 1997, in Chen, 2000, p. 344). They find that within both individualist and collectivist cultures, children make meaning of parenting styles in the same way. According to their findings, children universally respond negatively to authoritarian parenting and positively to authoritative parenting. They argue that power assertive approaches are linked with fear, anger, and maladaptive development in children while authoritative parenting, accompanied by guidance and communication of feeling, offer children the security to explore with confidence and safety and develop positive interpersonal relationships (Chen, 2000). It is also worth distinguishing between associations of authoritarian parenting with negative affect in comparison with authoritarian parenting linked with warmth. Whereas authoritarian parenting in individualist cultures may tend to be associated with negative coerciveness, detachment and anger, the same type of authoritarian parenting is not necessarily linked with lack of warmth across cultures (Rudy, D. 1999). African families typically express warmth, affection, and love freely among parents and children. The interconnectedness of individuals in a collectivist society corresponds to interconnectedness between family members. In Africa, children are traditionally raised not only by parents but by an

intergenerational collection of elders including grandparents, aunts and uncles, who play a vital role in child-rearing. The kinship system defines the status of the individual in relation to community. African concepts of *kinship* include extended family members as well as ancestors. “It is based on mutual aid, care giving, and communal interest ... The individual exists as a member of the kinship system and not as a sole entity” (Young, C. 2003, p. 168). The individual is considered “. . . simply part of the whole. Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people” (Mbiti, 1970, p. 141).

Such interconnectedness, interdependence, and emphasis on collective well-being over self-advancement conflict with individualistic American values. Competition for the sake of achieving success and power over others also conflicts with traditional collectivist values. Adopting such values and rejecting traditional ones may lead to confusion and psychological distress. “Assimilation demands both rejection, implicit or explicit, of essential parts of oneself and internalization of the idealized other” (Young, 2003, p.174). These contrasting fundamental values impact parenting and socialization for immigrant families. The ways that immigrant parents respond to such cultural differences affect intergenerational and intercultural tension and cohesion, struggle and resiliency.

Changing Roles within the Family Resulting from Displacement and Immigration

Migration to a new culture involves adjustment and adaptation for families on a variety of levels. When the transition is from a collectivist to an individualist society,

adjustment is especially challenging. Parents and children generally respond to the contrast between home and host culture according to four general patterns of acculturation: marginalization, separation, assimilation, and integration (Berry, 2007). Differences between the rate and model of acculturation among parents and children may generate stress and conflict in families. Acculturation also may include changes regarding the roles that mothers, fathers, sons and daughters play in the family system. The involvement of extended family members also frequently changes with immigration. Many immigrants from collectivist societies grew up surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents who all lived within or near the household and played a vital role in child-rearing and in mediating interpersonal conflicts between husbands and wives and parents and children. Among Somali refugees, some were already separated from extended family members before resettlement to the U.S., having lost relatives to war, violence, and displacement in refugee camps. The traditional model of extended family members sharing in raising children, intervening in decisions and preserving harmony within the family often contrasts sharply with life in the host country. The adjustment to marriage and parenting in an individualist society without the support and engagement of extended family typical of traditional collectivist, and particularly African cultures may become a painful source of isolation, loneliness, and suffering.

Acculturation of Immigrant Families

Acculturation is defined as “a process of cultural and psychological change in cultural groups, families, and individuals following intercultural contact” (Berry, in Lansford, 2007, p. 69). This process occurs as communities migrate from a home to host

culture, and also results from interactions between cultures through colonization and military invasion. Whereas adaptation has generally been understood in terms of the ethno-cultural group's absorption into the dominant culture, Berry describes this process as evolving over time as both groups mutually adapt to one another (Berry, in Lansford, 2007). Such changes occur on an individual psychological level, ranging with wide diversity of unique personal experience, as well as among sociocultural groups (Berry, in Lansford, 2007). Berry outlines four acculturation strategies with which non-dominant groups and individuals adapt to the dominant culture: marginalization, separation, assimilation, and integration. These four distinctions point to the range of experiences of adaptation, in contrast to a previous perspective that assumed the assimilation and absorption of the non-dominant into the dominant culture (Gordon, 1964, in Berry, in Lansford, 2007). "The goal, the process, and the end result of acculturation was thought to be the inevitable absorption of nondominant groups and individuals into the dominant society, leading to a culturally homogeneous society" (Berry, in Lansford, 2007, p. 74).

The four distinct strategies are based on the orientation of both groups in relation to one another in terms of preserving the non-dominant culture while interacting with the dominant culture. In terms of immigrant acculturation, *marginalization* occurs when members of the migrating group distance themselves from both their home culture as well as the host culture. *Separation* occurs when individuals maintain their home culture while resisting interaction with the dominant culture. When individuals prefer to interact with the host culture while rejecting connection to the home culture, *assimilation* takes place. *Integration* refers to the synthesis of sustaining original culture and daily participation with the dominant culture (Berry, in Lansford, 2007).

Berry also notes the impact of the dominant host culture on the immigrant group based on the legal and social climate of the host culture. When the host community is open and welcoming of diversity, immigrant groups feel more able to choose their strategy of adaptation. When the dominant culture inhibits multiculturalism, immigrant communities may be pressured to reject their home culture. In this way, when the larger society forces separation and marginalization, the ethno cultural group moves toward segregation and exclusion from the host society. The larger society's orientation toward a melting pot model stresses assimilation, and the embrace and acceptance of multiculturalism by the larger society allows for integration (Berry, 2007).

Berry's (2007) acculturation strategies generally correspond to varying degrees of success and quality of mental health on individual, familial, and communal levels. Marginalization and separation are considered the least adaptive and assimilation and integration optimal for well-being and positive sociocultural identity for immigrant children. For example, Falicov (2007) finds that "families who retain aspects of the original culture fare better in terms of general health, mental health, and education for the first and the second immigrant generations than those who abandon culture and language rapidly" (Beioser, Dion, Gotowiec, Hyman, & Vu, 1995; Darvies & McKelvey, 1998, in Falicov, 2007, p. 164). Some studies show a correlation between parenting styles that preserve home culture while permitting participation in the host culture with optimal mental health among children and family harmony. Many immigrant parents of diverse backgrounds, Somali refugees included, migrate in reaction to oppression and violence for the sake of safety for themselves and their families. It is not because they are attracted to the host country's culture or because they rejected their home country's

traditions, rituals, language, and values. They frequently value and preserve their culture of origin and strive to pass their values on to their children. In accordance with the integration strategy, “in general, families that are able to maintain their language of origin and ties to their home culture, while acquiring elements of the new language and culture seem to have the best outcome” (Falicov, 1998, in Mirkin, Suyemoto & Okun, 2005, p. 97).

Given the above, parental exclusion from interactions with the host community tends to create increased intergenerational conflict and an experience among immigrant children of alienation from the home culture (Falicov, 2007). Conflict over acculturation preferences may arise between members of the immigrant and host communities when dominant groups oppose the expression and practice of immigrant culture. Tension may also exist within immigrant families across generations and among family members when children challenge parents’ acculturation strategy or husbands and wives differ in their adaptation preferences, resulting in acculturative stress for immigrant families (Berry, in Lansford, 2007). Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to such stress when parents struggle with acculturation. Studies of South Asian families reveal that differences between parent and child acculturation modes result in unhealthy family cohesion (Ross-Sheriff, in Lansford, 2007).

Parents who had a separated or marginalized style of acculturation reported higher family conflict than those who had an integrated or assimilated acculturation style. Adolescents reported higher self esteem, less anxiety, and less family conflict when there was no acculturation gap between them and their parents (Farver, 2002, p. 338).

Many studies show that integration tends to be the most psychologically adaptive strategy for immigrant families (Farver, 2002). Farver (2002) found more psychological

problems among adolescents whose parents did not adapt to but rather separated from the host culture in comparison with parents who were integrated or assimilated. “At the family level... the joint search for maintaining one’s heritage culture and identity...and participation in the day-to-day life of the larger society outside the family are suggested as the most adaptive way to carry out family life during acculturation” (Berry, in Lansford, 2007, p. 80). While there are differing opinions as to whether integration or separation is preferable for optimal adjustment among varying immigrant groups, Berry believed assimilation was rarely helpful and marginalization was the most harmful pattern. In studies of Asian Indian immigrant families in the U.S., Farver (2000) noted that those who are marginalized, separated and assimilated experience greater stress, anxiety and psychological problems related to acculturation than those who are integrated or bicultural. “Overall, marginalized individuals suffered the most psychological distress, including problems with self-identification and cultural alienation, which adversely affected their self-esteem” (Farver, 2002 p. 339).

Berry discusses findings from a study (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006) that compared family relationship values of obligations and adolescent rights among nonimmigrant and immigrant family acculturation and adaptation (Berry, in Lansford, 2007). These immigrant parents developed their mode of socialization in their country of origin. However, their children became at least somewhat socialized in the host country, depending on their age at the time of resettlement. Findings showed that discrepancies in socialization across generations emerged. Berry notes that “immigrant children are usually more exposed to the values of the new society, contributing to their acceptance of the values held by their national peers” (Lansford, 2007, p. 78). Berry

found that, while nonimmigrant families also experience value discrepancies, immigrant families showed significantly greater discrepancies between adolescents' and their parents' values regarding family obligations (Berry, in Lansford, 2007). Further, among adolescents who felt significantly different from their parents in terms of the role and meaning of family obligation, these discrepancies negatively impacted sociocultural adaptation (Berry in Lansford, 2007). These researchers concluded that it is critical for those professionals who work with immigrant families to assess acculturative preferences of parents and children and discrepancies within families.

Studies of Arab Muslim adolescent identity patterns in the United States show varying degrees of acculturative stress and support according to the families' level of identification with Arab Muslim cultural groups (Britto & Amer, 2007). In a study of second generation young adult Arab Muslim Americans, three groups of cultural identity were outlined based on affiliation to Arab and American cultures: moderate bicultural identity, high bicultural identity, and high Arab cultural identity. The *bicultural identity* groups connected equally with both Arab and American cultures, whereas the *high Arab cultural identity* group affiliated more with Arab than American culture. The *moderate bicultural* group reported weaker family obligation and dependence as well as greater acculturative stress in the home, including: greater feelings of disengagement and cultural differences with their family members" (Britto & Amer, 2007, p. 147). Young adults of the moderate bicultural group ". . . were less likely to be engaged or married, and they experienced less family support and more acculturative stressors" (Britto & Amer, 2007, p. 137). Weaker personal and Arab identity may correspond to greater inter-generational conflict between Arab Muslim parents and children (Britto & Amer, 2007). This finding

supports the notion that high preservation of original culture and strong integration of and affiliation with both the original and host cultures are most adaptive acculturation patterns. Findings also showed that high Arab cultural affiliation and high bicultural connection corresponded more with involved parenting than in the moderate bicultural group which also reported greater acculturation gaps (Britto & Amer, 2007). Such research on Arab Muslim young adults and family acculturation in the United States is rare and further studies are needed to better understand cultural identity development and parenting strategies among Arab Muslim immigrant families and children.

The Changing Role of Parents and Children

Previous research has examined the impact of cross-cultural relocation on a macro level, focusing on societal ethnic integration, and on a micro level, the adjustments of individuals. However, there has been less focus on the impact on family relationships and the socialization of children and transmission of culture (Navarra and Lollis, 2009). Navarra and Lollis, in researching Jamaican immigrant families in Canada, describe a fluid process of preserving and transforming culture of origin across generations. They note, “The context of immigration provides useful information when considering the transmission of values, especially highlighting the ways in which parents and children adopt, reject, or reconstruct values from the culture of origin into the values of the new culture” (Navara & Lollis, 2009, p. 443). Recent research on socialization diverges from a traditional understanding that parents transmit culture unidirectionally onto children and shifts to gaining an understanding of the dynamic process parents and children engage in together as relationships and values develop and transform over time. Immigration “. . .

brings cultural practices out of the realm of the unconsidered into conscious choice made by immigrant parents and children” (Navara & Lollis, 2009, p. 442).

The experience of resettlement in the United States for most refugee immigrants in general, and for Somali Bantu refugees in particular, means transitioning from a collectivist to individualist society. Acculturation refers to the process of adapting to a new culture of the host country, along with the transformations individuals experience in assimilating or integrating. Arend-Toth & Van de Vijver (2008) conducted a study that investigated the effect of acculturation from collectivist to individualist cultures. Mixed findings emerged about resulting changes in family relationships across generations (Arend-Toth & Van de Vijver, 2008). For some immigrant communities, adapting to the new culture led to weakening family cohesion and increased family conflict, while for other groups, family bonds were strengthened.

Many immigrant parents of diverse cultures struggle with ongoing tension between rigidly retaining control of their children and adopting a more permissive stance typical of some segments of American culture. This tendency towards strict control may be consistent with traditional parenting values of collectivist nonwestern cultures. Chinese parents, for example, are traditionally more controlling and protective than Western parents. Rooted in Confucian doctrine of filial piety, traditional Chinese child-rearing ideology prioritizes obedience and reverence for parents (Chen, 2000). Compared with North American parents, Chen (2000) finds Chinese parents more authoritarian, more likely to use physical punishment, and more rejecting of and less affectionate towards children (Chen, 2000, p. 343). Independent thinking, curiosity and

exploration are traditionally discouraged in children in favor of conformity and obedience (Chen, 2000).

Farver (2002) describes the dilemma immigrant parents often face in “reconciling the need for their children and themselves to adopt facets of the Western lifestyle to be successful in school and society (Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Uba, 1994; Ying, 1998 in Farver, 2002, p. 339). Farver finds these conflicts greatest among immigrant groups whose home culture differs most sharply in terms of adolescent freedom and autonomy (Farver, 2002). In particular, Farver (2002) describes conflicts between parents and adolescents among Asian Indian families to revolve mainly around tensions over autonomy and independence related to dating, marriage, and choice of career.

Similarly, in a study of immigrant Vietnamese adolescents, Matsuoka (1990) found that prior to immigration adolescents had based their sense of identity on family models and relationships. However, after living in the United States for a period of time, they were influenced by the independence and autonomy characteristic of American mainstream adolescents and relied more on their peers as models for identity than on their families (Farver, 2002, p. 341).

In this way, immigrant parents may experience a loss of control which threatens the traditional value of parental authority, hierarchy, and obligation. In reaction, immigrant parents may feel an increased need for control, increasing intergenerational tension and family conflict. A study of East Indian families found parents to equate loss of parental control with their children’s rejection of their family and heritage (Baptiste, 2005).

“Consequently, they often perceive children’s, especially young adults’, separation and individuation from the family, and their acquisition and practice of the behavioral standards and customs of the US culture as a rejection of the parents and their values” (Baptiste, 2005, p.352).

Among immigrant parents, the pull towards control may be augmented by concerns with children assimilating too much with American society in pernicious ways. Immigrant parents of adolescents may fear that permissiveness makes children vulnerable to drugs, delinquency and sexual promiscuity (Falicov, 2007). Further, refugee immigrant parents fleeing the trauma of violence and war may approach parenting with extra protectiveness, fear, and mistrust (Weine, 2006). Post traumatic stress of having survived war and brutality combined with a perception of American society's threat to the traditional culture of origin may impact parenting styles and beliefs.

In the context of Bosnian Muslim refugees in the U.S., Weine (2006) explored the ambivalence among parents between appreciating the opportunity and safety represented in the host country and the distrust and fear that American society would corrupt traditional culture and identity. Weine considered this experience as a balance between a "double edged perception" of the United States culture as a source of greater possibility and security for their children as well as a threat to family obligation and parental control, leading parents to balance being "on guard versus in tune" (Weine, 2006, p. 6). Parents who felt *on guard* emphasized protecting and controlling their children and reported a sense of isolation and separation from other Bosnians and non-Bosnian culture.

Some parents reported believing that they must protect the boundary between their youths and the social and cultural life outside of their family, with little room for letting children explore. They said, "I am afraid of this country," "We want to keep children from bad people," "We should have more control," "We should limit their going out," and, "I am on guard." Parents often linked their fear concerning youths in the city and schools both with their experiences of war trauma and loss and with their sense that the family as they knew it was now under siege in America (Weine, 2006, p. 6).

In tune parenting meant active involvement with their children's school, teachers and neighborhood. Weine's findings support an integration model of acculturation as more adaptive and leading to greater satisfaction for families. Some young people in the study confirmed a preference for and possibility of integrating exploring responsibly while sustaining connection and obligations to family and ancestors.

These youths expressed the attitude that they were taking appropriate advantage of the new life being offered to them and were mindful of their parents' concerns. They said that their parents would be more helpful to them if they were less on guard and more in tune (Weine, 2006, p. 6)

Parents who reported becoming more in tune with their children reflected an adaptation to American parenting values and culture by trusting their children more and learning about American culture. Some parents described a change in orientation compared to their culture of origin, claiming, "Parents should be more involved than in Bosnia," "Parents should trust kids more . . . and let kids choose their future [and] families should talk about their culture in positive ways, so that kids will not forget" (Weine, 2006, p. 6).

Opinion also differs regarding recommendations and interventions for parenting styles that promote optimal adjustment of families from collectivist to individualistic societies. Whereas some literature (Falicov, 2007) suggests a preference for teaching immigrant parents to adapt to more individualistic values, more recent research (Beiser, Dion, Gotozic, Hyman, & Vu, 1995; Davies & McKelvey, 1998) correlates familial preservation of traditional culture with immigrant children's well-being (Falicov, 2007). Immigrant parents preserving traditional family values and culture may in fact be preferable. ". . . In fact, it appears that families who retain aspects of the original culture fare better in terms of general health, mental health, and education for the first and

second immigrant generations than those who abandon culture and language rapidly” (Beiser, Dion, Gotowiec, Hyman, & Vu, 1995; Davies & McKelvey, 1998, in Falicov, 2007, p. 164).

Similar to families migrating from collectivist societies in general, Somali immigrant families in the U.S. may face changes in parental authority and parent-child role reversal as the younger generation more quickly adapts and learns English. This situation, common among most originally non-English speaking immigrant groups, potentially erodes parental authority and threatens to weaken cultural and religious continuity. “The fear is that fraternization and peer pressure will lead children to abandon their religious roots and cultural values” (Koshen, 2007, p. 85). In Koshen’s (2007) study of Somali families in Diaspora, mothers expressed a typical concern, “Our inadequacy is such that our children have to accompany us everywhere and translate for us; how can we command respect when we are so dependent on them?” (Koshen, 2007, p. 85). In response to this common theme, Llerena-Quinn and Mirkin (2005) recommend that immigrant mothers find adults they can trust to serve as interpreters in order to avoid relying solely on their children. They also warn that service providers must resist this dynamic of relying on the children for translation. “A mother’s limited language skills result in many misunderstandings in the family, restricted access to her children’s world and schooling, and diminished capacity to get to know the world her children now occupy” (Llerena-Quinn and Mirkin, 2005, p. 98). This feeling of disconnect and distance from children might further exacerbate a common experience of immigrant mothers of isolation and loneliness.

Gender Role Changes for Immigrant Families amidst Acculturation

The effects of war and displacement led to diminishing the power of Somali men to provide for their families. Traditional gender role divisions inherent in Somali Bantu culture and informed by Sunni Muslim practice may differ from American values regarding gender. Somali Bantu men may struggle with the tension between the Muslim value and expectation that men provide financially for the family and the reality that their wives need to and are able to work and contribute to the household (Koshen, A. 2007). It is useful for social workers and mental health providers to understand the context of their struggle and its impact on families. “Internal tensions within the family are also emerging as a consequence of the drastic alternation of the traditional role of men as providers. Given the patriarchal nature of the society, this change in the delicate balance of gender roles, has nullified the image of men as breadwinners and absolved them from providing material support for their families” (Koshen, 2007, p. 88). One male Somali refugee described the sense of worthlessness that accompanied his inability to support the family, “We have been supporting the family for years before the war, and if today women somehow become the breadwinners, they shouldn’t disgrace us, but they should become considerate and sensitive to our feelings” (Academy for Peace and Development, 2002 in Koshen, 2007, p83). As Koshen (2001) noted, the empowerment of women may contribute to the greatest change in family dynamics. This shifting pattern of empowerment is typical of many immigrant cultures as well (Dion & Dion, 2001).

Immigrant women may suffer increased stress associated with the excessive double burden of domestic responsibilities of child-care and household work combined with employment. For women who were not responsible for earning money in their

homeland, the expectation (and opportunity) to work outside the home may generate more anxiety and depression. Noh, Speechley and Kaspar's (1992) study of Korean immigrants in Canada linked employment status with poorer mental health among immigrant women. Being employed was shown to be a risk factor for depression among immigrant women, and female immigrants had a higher incident of depression than males. Further, discrepancies between depression among men and women were more prominent among advantaged groups than disadvantaged, perhaps because men reaped the benefits of social resources more than women, while women suffered from role overload. Noh and colleagues (1992) point out that disadvantaged immigrant groups experienced worse mental health overall, for men and women. Among advantaged groups, women suffered more than men. "These findings suggest that social-structural factors that might be expected to facilitate personal well-being and adaptation in the receiving society may not always function in the same manner for male and female immigrants" (Dion & Dion, 2001, p. 513).

Dion and Dion (2001) describe shifts in gender roles, behavior and personality among Korean immigrant couples in the United States associated with women working outside the home. Dion and Dion refer to a study by Lim (1997) showing this change as threatening male authority and leading to increased assertiveness in women. One husband stated,

After she started working her voice got louder than in the past. Now, she says whatever she wants to me. She shows a lot of self-assertion. She didn't do that in Korea. Right after I came to the U.S., I heard that Korean wives change a lot in America. Now, I clearly understand what it means. (Lim, 1997, p. 38).

His wife confirmed this change in dynamic. “In the U.S., wives also work to make money as their husbands do, so women are apt to speak out at least one time on what they previously restrained from saying” (Lim, 1997, p. 38).

De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren (2007) describe tendencies for refugee couples from patriarchal societies to experience conflict around gender role changes. “Gender roles from the homeland may be questioned within the spousal relationship. While fathers are often strict concerning the preservations of cultural values, mothers might be inclined to question the traditional gender stereotypes” (De Haene, et al., 2007, p. 245). Dion and Dion (2001) also note changes in gender roles in the case of immigrants who migrate in stages, such that the husband generally moves first to seek work and the wife and children follow. According to studies by Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) of Mexican immigrant couples in the U.S., migration required men and women to take on those responsibilities that their spouses previously held because they found themselves temporarily living separately. Husbands were required by necessity to learn to perform household domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning as wives acquired greater autonomy and competency with increased responsibilities. One woman reported, “I did all of these things alone, and in this way, I discovered my capacities. And do you know, these accomplishments gave me satisfaction” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992, p. 402). Interestingly, upon reunification, these studies found that the couples who had been separated by state migration retained the more equal responsibilities they had become accustomed to, rather than revert to traditional gender roles (Dion & Dion, 2001).

Similar to the double burden expectation of women to fulfill traditional gender role expectations of the home culture while adding on the responsibility of employment,

immigrant daughters may face the conflict of behaving according to traditional values while seeking education and career advancement. Family socialization and achievement goals may represent extra pressure on girls. Immigrant daughters may experience more tension than sons between sustaining traditional family obligations, relationships and traditions while pursuing personal development (Dion & Dion, 2001). Ross-Sheriff, Tirmazi and Walsh (2007) found that Muslim immigrant mothers in the United States were protective of their daughters and especially wary that they may abandon traditional Muslim practice and become too Americanized. Even for those mothers who valued education, many insisted that their daughters forgo higher education in favor of marrying early into a Muslim family (Ross-Sheriff et al. in Lansford, 2007). “At times, the goals and aspirations of mothers for their daughters lead to decisions that are contradictory. Mothers struggle with competing goals, such as the development of an identity that reflects religious, cultural, social, and personal components” (Ross-Sheriff et al., in Lansford, 2007, p. 208).

Changes in the Role of the Extended Family

The Somali family structure of extended families comprised of maternal and paternal relatives living in the same household crumbled with the chaos and devastation of civil war, displacement and immigration. One of the most difficult adjustments to life in Diaspora (referring to the condition of having emigrated mainly to Europe, North America and Australia in search of asylum), has been the pain of separation, isolation, and loneliness. As a Danish social worker described, “Somalis in Africa know the suffering of war and the destitution in refugee camps, but not the suffering of isolation

and loneliness of living in Diaspora without the same degree of community” (Koshen, 2007, p 86). Forced separation from extended family is often a great source of stress for Somali immigrants, particularly women. The struggles in adapting to resettlement seem to be rooted primarily in loneliness, which permeates the experience of many immigrants who suffer separation from family and disconnection from community. In a study of Somali immigrant women in Australia, McMichael and Manderson (2004) found that their greatest challenge and adjustment to be social isolation and disconnect from their host culture’s values. This situation is akin to the separation model of acculturation strategies defined by Berry (Berry, 2007, in Lansford). “Few Somali women . . . consider themselves part of a wider Australian community: their neighbors do not speak the same language, some people are unwelcoming, the culture of Anglo Australians is less communal than in Somalia, and their own religious beliefs and language set them apart” (McMichael & Manderson, 2004, p. 95)

The traditional role of extended family members in raising children also impacts childcare preferences among African immigrant parents (Obeng, 2007). C.S. Obeng’s (2007) study of childcare preferences of immigrant families confirms the orientation towards collective child-rearing and family structures comprised of multiple generations. The participants’ responses to interview questions reflected their conception of children within the family system as incorporating nieces and nephews, rather than distinguishing them from biological children. Her study highlights how researchers may presume a cultural value and unwittingly and inappropriately apply it to another cultural group. Obeng’s study provides a helpful example of cultural bias inherent in certain questions and the importance of careful and expansive questioning that probes basic definitions and

understandings of family members and their roles. For example, in her study of African immigrant families, demographic questions regarding the number of children living in their households revealed such inaccurate assumptions. In the many cases where nephews and nieces lived together with aunts and uncles, the respondents did not distinguish between extended and nuclear family members as being part of the core family or being referred to as their children. Obeng points out the assumption inherent in the question of how many children participants had. She discovered, on further questioning, that participants were reluctant to use the terms niece and nephew in favor of grouping all children together. As two respondents stated, “making a distinction between such children has the tendency of making the extended family members feel rejected or not seen as genuine members of the family” (Obeng, 2007, p. 261). Most of the African immigrants interviewed in her study expressed a preference for having a family member at home caring for the children. If that were not possible, the next best option would be another African family as caregiver. “I believe a family member would instill the kind of moral behavior that I would expect my children to have” (Obeng, 2007, p. 262). In traditional African culture, child-rearing is shared responsibility among relatives and community members. “Every adult in a neighborhood is responsible for the well-being of the children in that neighborhood” (Obeng, 2007, p. 262).

In her study of immigrant families, Falicov (2007) argues for an appreciation of the multiple attachments inherent in many collectivistic families. She reminds the reader that, “an immigrant mother most likely belongs to a collectivistic culture in which young children may be raised responsibly by a loving grandmother or other relatives, surrounded by many adults and children” (p. 160).

Traditional Conflict Resolution and Concepts of Western Mental Health Services

When individuals and families in collectivist societies of Africa generally experience conflict, they typically respond in fundamentally different ways than western families with individualistic orientations. For example, children from traditional African cultures may resist outwardly expressing anger directly towards parents out of deference and respect towards parents and authority figures. Instead of open communication of feelings, they may regulate behaviors through attempting hunger strikes and intentionally or unconsciously developing psychosomatic symptoms of illness (Nwoye, 2006). Nwoye describes this *analogical communication* as a socially acceptable means of seeking attention and protesting parental displays of favoritism towards siblings or miscalculations in decision-making (p. 19). In response to family conflict, parents may access support and guidance for mediation and negotiation through the resources of extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles. “In the past, when parents and children were in conflict with one another, uncles and aunts came in freely to intervene as indigenous therapists. They see each other’s children as their own children . . . (and) . . . any adult can correct another’s child as a child of the village” (Achege, 1958; Ayot, 1979; Kenyatta, 1938, in Nwoye, A. 2006, p. 7).

Community leaders of elders also may intervene to negotiate and mediate family disputes. Koshen (2007) describes the fundamental function of the clan elders in traditional Somali society.

Parallel to functional government systems, customary or *xeer* law administered by clan elders is observed. This traditional form of law borrows heavily from Islamic *Shari’ah* law and is a unique blend of conventions and procedures with

precedents passed down orally through generations, enshrining basic values of Somali society. It includes elements of protection as well as covering day-to-day issues such as management of communal land and pastures, conflict management and prevention, family law and justice, *diya* (blood money), and compensation for defamation. (Koshen, 2007, p. 76).

Throughout sub-Saharan African societies, dispute settlement by community elders is common. Harkness, Edwards, and Super (1981) studied a system of conflict mediation by male leaders in a small Kipsigis community of western Kenya, known as Kokwet, as an example of traditional dispute settlement. While British colonial rule and subsequent Kenyan national government imposed a western style judicial system for resolving serious crimes, community elders still resolved conflicts within families and between neighbors.

In sub-Saharan groups lacking superordinate systems of authority (Bohannon, 1957; Gluckman, 1959 Gulliver, 1963; Saltman, 1977) . . . the only force behind the settlement of disputes is public opinion; consequently, a prime characteristic of the dispute settlement process is the participation of the community. The main goal of dispute settlements in communities such as Kokwet is not to uphold an abstract principle of justice but rather to bring the disputants into social equilibrium with each other and thereby reestablish peace in the community. (Harkness, Edwards, & Super, 1981, p. 597).

In this Kokwet community, the community leaders are known as *boisiek*, or “senior men.” Consistent with descriptions of community leaders throughout traditional African communities, these men achieve their status through moral integrity, diplomacy and rhetorical skills (Harkness, Edwards, & Super, 1981).

Thus, the emphasis in traditional African dispute settlement is on cooperation, peace-making, and upholding societal values for the collective betterment of the community. In contrast, dispute settlement in western individualistic society values competition and individual success over others more highly. In Kokwet, and, by

inference, in traditional African societies in general, “obeying society’s standards is perceived as a goal in its own right, not simply as a way of obtaining desirable practical consequences for oneself” (Harkness, Edwards, & Super, 1981, p. 601).

In traditional African societies, marriage counseling reflects a particular model of intervention and mediation by the parents of the married couple and values prioritizing harmony within the home (Mkhize, 1990). Harmony within the tribe and, by extension, within the family, was traditionally considered crucial in ensuring tribal stability. Family conflict was viewed as an offense to ancestors and a vulnerability to enemy attack.

Within a family and/or extended family, conflicts had to be resolved quickly after they had arisen because it was believed that ancestors were against any form of confusion that might occur within the family. If conflicts were not soon resolved there was a belief that such would anger the ancestors (Mkhize, 1990, p. 71).

Ancestors were understood to punish family members with illness and misfortune for refraining from a swift resolution of conflict. In this context, the quick resolution of family conflicts would be considered imperative for the collective, impacting the security and health of the entire community beyond the individuals of the family.

Further, gender values regarding women’s experience of anger shape the way husbands and wives respond to marital conflict (Mkhize, 1990). According to Mkhize’s description of traditional African customary law and roles of women, the culture prohibited wives from challenging their husbands and voicing discontent with the marriage. The expression of anger was not an option. Mkhize emphasizes the woman’s subordination by her lack of agency. “Hence, the wife’s strategy to cope with all the dissatisfaction was that of avoidance, not accommodation, because the latter has to take

place through expression of will, which was not afforded to the wife” (Mkhize, 1990, p. 71). Traditionally, a disgruntled wife who could not endure her anger would silently leave her husband to return to her father’s home. Her father would then bring her back to her husband’s home where the father, and possibly her husband’s father, would advise their children to reconcile for the sake of the ancestors. If the husband refused to take the wife back, he would build a separate home near his, where the wife and children would reside, in order to sustain connection between the children and father (Mkhize, 1990).

Mkhize’s description of traditional African dispute resolution is consistent with the literature. He underscores the primary value of swiftly restoring marital harmony and peace through the intervention of extended family members, similar to the model of the council of elders. In many western countries where Somali refugees have immigrated, councils of elders have been established to resolve interpersonal, familial, and community conflicts in response to struggles with resettlement (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Based on such community structures in traditional Somali society, these “Somali courts” are usually organized according to clan affiliation, led by men, and play a fundamental role in Somali immigrant life (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Formal laws and courts do not play a role, nor do professional mental health services. Therapy within an American western context as a model for marital conflict resolution would not only be alien to such a culture but contradictory. Inviting a woman to voice her dissatisfaction in a marriage would seem unthinkable within a culture that forbids a woman’s expression of anger. Cultural competency with African immigrants in general would require sensitivity to the possible role of such values and norms.

In a study of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, Sharon and Shwartzman (1998) present an integration of a traditional model of conflict mediation with western therapy. Between 1983 and 1993, two major immigration movements brought approximately twenty thousand members of the Jewish community of Ethiopia to Israel (Kruger, 2005). Ethiopian immigrants, coming from a traditional African collectivist society, faced stark contrasts in social systems in Israel, including models for responding to individual, family, and communal conflict. Similar to the model of the council of elders prevalent throughout traditional African societies, the *shimagla* (in Amhari, the language of this community) played the role of “wise elder-mediator” in traditional Ethiopian communities (Sharon & Shwartzman, 1998, p. 5). “The *shmaglotz*’ (plural form) mandate was mainly in the areas of interpersonal and communal matters. More specifically, the mission of the *shmaglotz* was to defuse a wide range of inter- and intrafamily conflicts” (Sharon & Shwartzman, 1998, p. 5). These problems included marital disputes that might involve extended family members. They also mediated disputes regarding property, injury, and murder to avert feuds and revenge among individuals and families (Sharon & Shwartzman, 1998).

The family conflict mediation methods traditionally employed by the *shmaglotz* involved highly structured interventions aimed at full reconciliation and culminating in a renewed marriage contract amenable to husband and wife. The typical seven step process reflects values and strategies that share differences and similarities with modern western therapy. Similar to modern practice, traditional Ethiopian mediation includes individual and joint sessions offering both partners the opportunity to express their perspectives of the problems, their future expectations and possibilities for compromise (Sharon &

Shwartzman, 1998). The models diverge regarding fundamental qualities of orientation and approach to practice. Modern therapy tends to view conflict as natural without an imposition of judgment or overly directive assertion of a solution by the mediator. In contrast, the Ethiopian model presumes that open conflict is negative and separation of spouses should be avoided. Communication techniques of mediators include “indirect discussion of problems using images and parables, (an) active approach, persuasion, white lies, threats and coercion if necessary” (Sharon & Shwartzman, 1998, p. 10). Another relevant difference is the perception of the involved parties extending beyond the nuclear family to the extended family (Sharon & Shwartzman, 1998).

Sharon and Shwartzman (1998) described the innovative, collaborative project of Israeli professional agencies who integrated the *shmaglotz* with western modern practice. This project emerged in the mid 1990’s in response to a growing sense of ineffective service provisions to Ethiopian immigrants in Israel experiencing family conflict. Sharon and Shwartzman describe the context of increasing reports of family problems, including domestic violence, desertion, and divorce, among Ethiopian immigrants, amidst language and cultural obstacles of Israeli helping professionals in providing services.

The failure of local agencies to deal with the multitude of problems in the immigrant community has made the utilization of traditional arrangements more attractive. The need to seek alternative means has been further reinforced by the current approach and policy regarding immigration, which . . . has shifted from a melting pot orientation to one of cultural pluralism” (Sharon & Shwartzman, 1998, p. 4).

The implementation of the *shmaglotz*, according to findings of Sharon and Schwartzman, show success overall in terms of increasing access to helpful services for Ethiopian immigrants as well as empowering the community to preserve original culture

and values. In addition, application of traditional models enhances cultural competency and effectiveness of professionals serving the immigrant community. “Several professionals related to the authors that their association with the project has contributed to a better understanding of their clients and their clients’ problems and several of the techniques could be generalized to other client populations” (Sharon & Shwartzman, 1998, p. 11). Sharon and Shwartzman present a model of implementation and integration of traditional Ethiopian intervention that offers practical implications for western practice with a variety of immigrant communities in other societies. As they express, “this article is a reminder that mediation has universal and deeply established roots” (Sharon & Shwartzman, 1998, p. 11).

*Discord between Western Family Therapy and Traditional African Values and
Collectivist Cultures*

In order to serve Somali refugee families effectively, it is necessary to understand the way they may perceive and experience services based on contrasting cultural values about therapy, mental illness, family conflict, and perceptions about western medical practice. Among immigrant groups in general, especially those with religion and culture most foreign from the dominant groups in American society, misunderstandings and miscommunications go both ways. Professional service providers and recipients may be hindered by a combination of assumptions and expectations that impede offering and receiving culturally competent support.

Augustine Nwoye (2006) contrasts the philosophies of western family therapeutic models with traditional African values. Minuchin’s (1974) western model of family

therapy that values confrontation and the presence of parents and their children in the room together is quite foreign to traditional African families. As discussed previously, deference to parents and obedience to authority inhibit children from making negative statements about their parents. Mediation is therefore preferable in parent-child conflict. Effective therapy with these collectivist groups would not stress concepts that individuals are separate from their problems and have power over them, as Epston and White (1990) espouse, but offer, instead, “a realistic response to an aversive external environment within which the individual lives” (Nwoye, 2006. p. 21). Given this background of traditional African family values and orientation towards dispute settlement, it is understandable that western therapeutic models of outsiders intervening in family matters, expecting children to speak openly in front of their parents, and even emphasizing confrontation between parents and children would be perceived as foreign, unacceptable and incongruous. Cultural competency regarding traditional family values and modes of healing and conflict resolution must be appreciated in order for western social work practice to effectively serve African immigrant populations in general and Somali refugee communities in particular.

Baptiste (2005) identified and described numerous examples among East Indian families of resistance towards and conflict with the values and structure of western family therapy. Cultural differences between the East Indian families and western therapists were so discordant that therapy became highly problematic and ineffective. Baptiste noted those themes of acculturative challenges that parents frequently experience: loss of parental authority over children in general and specifically regarding discipline and selection of children’s mate, along with loss of stature within the East Indian community

due to children's out-of-culture behaviors (p. 356). Without understanding and validating differences in cultural values and behaviors, western therapists risk negative therapeutic outcomes. Baptiste identified two major issues that interfere with an effective therapeutic alliance: 1) dissonance between the cultural orientation of therapist and client and 2) lack of therapist credibility because of gender and cultural differences (Baptiste, 2005). For example, Baptiste discovered that therapists who imposed their own feminist, egalitarian values and ignored traditional East Indian cultural hierarchy within family systems met with resistance. In one example of a family therapy session, in an attempt to elicit comments from the wife and daughter who were silenced by the husband/father to whom they defer, the therapist met resistance from not only the man, but all the family members (Baptiste, 2005). Further, female therapists, by virtue of their gender, often face an inherent obstacle. East Indian women and men may feel that it is inappropriate to disclose private personal matters to a woman in the format of therapy. Ascribing authority and respect to women may be extremely challenging.

It is common for immigrants from collectivist cultures to seek support for family conflict and acculturation stress within informal networks of family neighbors and friends rather than formal networks from the host country (Legault, Gravel, Fortin, Heneman and Cardinal, 1997). Legault and colleagues' study (1997) of Canadian immigrant families originally from the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America found a discrepancy between immigrants' and practitioners' perceptions and priorities of acculturation problems and preference and accessibility of services. Immigrants ranked loneliness, isolation, child care and education issues as their biggest adaptation problems, especially for women. Legault noted that women may feel especially alone, given the common

narrowing of family and community of origin networks that frequently accompanies migration. These parents worried more than their practitioners realized about limited child care options, given the lack of extended family to help with childcare and the reluctance to rely on non-relatives for child care. Case managers working for the local community health system were also found to be less attuned to families' concerns about preserving and transmitting culture. Immigrant parents focused more than practitioners on negative influences of the host culture on their children.

Practitioners instead focused on parent-child and husband-wife dynamics that they viewed as problematic. The practitioners' concern with parental disciplinary methods and inequality in the husband- wife relationships reflected a cultural bias. "This awareness (of inequality in couples) may be linked to the feminist movement. However, making these problems a priority presupposes a readiness to challenge and renegotiate social roles within the immigrant couple." (Legault, 1997, p. 74). Even though such unequal power dynamics between immigrant husbands and wives may cause marital stress, Legault and colleagues did not find that the participants in their study were ready or willing to challenge such values. Further, because immigrant parents tended to view marital and family problems as residing in the private domain and because of lack of knowledge of available services, they tended to avoid seeking formal support.

This divergence between immigrant families and practitioners in perception and priority of problems as well as in terms of accessibility of support represents a fundamental, cultural misunderstanding thus presenting a challenge in offering effective service. In a study of public health nurses working with immigrant families, cultural assumptions and biases proved to inform practice (Foss, 1996). "Expected standards for

parenting behaviors came from personal values (and) interpretations of how the dominant culture defines ‘good parenting’” (Foss, 1996, p. 84). Foss also found that nurses tended to apply assumptions and expectations based on limited experience with a particular cultural group to all cultural groups without sensitivity to distinction. Foss (1996) added that cultural competency must appreciate the meaning that parenting and the parent-child relationship plays in a particular culture and the interaction of influences from migration and acculturation. “It is essential to know what is considered normal by various immigrant groups when they first arrive, then how maternal-infant interaction patterns in specific immigrant groups are influenced by immigration experiences and subsequent cultural transition” (Foss, 1996, p. 85).

Legault and colleagues (1997) explored the advantages and disadvantages of practitioners and service providers sharing the culture of immigrant families. They referred to studies showing that some clients feel more comfortable consulting members of their cultural group because they can communicate better in the shared language. On the other hand, some clients prefer the distance and privacy of working with an outsider to avoid judgment and gossip within their immigrant community (Lebel, 1986; Welin & Ervin, 1991).

Another impediment to effective practice is the biased assumption of traditional western therapy that the dyad of the biological mother and child is the optimal and most influential relationship in a child’s life. In Africa, as well as most collectivist societies, it is common for many family members and other adults to responsibly raise children. A child from a collectivist culture may grow up with multiple early attachments. This phenomenon challenges the constructs of therapeutic models based on the primacy of

attachment in the mother-child dyad. “Psychological theories that elevate the biological mother-child relationship above all others limit our capacity to understand motherhood as a trigenerational endeavor that often exists before migration. . .” (Falicov, 2007, p. 161). Effective therapy, in these situations, would explore and affirm the role of extended family members who participate in raising families.

Falicov (2007) also proposes therapeutic interventions that creatively promote emotional and virtual connections to extended family and culture of origin through communication technology, where possible, and through memory. “More than ever, immigrants are now able to keep up their emotional ties with their families and countries by using new technologies of communication. . . Links across borders bring about the ambiguities of living with two hearts instead of a broken heart (p. 158) Falicov stressed the role of memory [i.e. immigrant’s remembrances of their families left behind in the country of origin] that therapists can make use of in sustaining connections as part of the healing process. “Therapeutic conversations must make room for the notion of virtual families who feed off a memory bank that increases chances for continuity of psychological presence” (p. 160).

Distrust and skepticism among immigrant groups in relation to western service providers and institutions adds an additional layer of complexity to the challenge of offering effective services. Manderson and Allotey (2003) found great dissatisfaction with the experience of health care among women from the Horn of Africa refugee community of Melbourne. Their studies of African and Middle Eastern immigrants’ poor clinical care in Australia may shed light on a tendency among immigrants towards distrust of western medical and mental health services. The findings also underscore the

impact of gossip and storytelling in reinforcing perceptions of risks and misunderstanding, in warning against negative outcomes of health care with outsiders, and in promoting agency and advocacy. For example, Manderson and Allotey describe culturally inappropriate medical treatment administered to Muslim immigrant patients for whom the procedure was considered among their culture to be abhorrent to Islam.

Some controversy centered on pregnancy among Muslim immigrant women. Rumors spread that Australian doctors, following Cesarean sections, injected Muslim women with pork, which was understood to spiritually contaminate their bodies. The Australian doctors had not anticipated the religious concern with Heparin, prepared from the guts of pig intestines, nor had they effectively communicated its life-saving anticoagulant purpose or sought out alternatives. From the perspectives of many women, the cost of such contamination was more serious than the risk of maternal death. Other concerns for pregnant Muslim immigrant women grew out of perceptions that racist Australian doctors promoted termination of pregnancies in order to prevent the birth of black babies. Again, doctors failed to adequately communicate the risks and ramifications of medical practices such as amniocentesis with patients. Doctors further lacked the cultural competency to anticipate how Muslim immigrant women might experience their care.

In addition, difficulties arose with interpreters who accompanied the women to medical appointments. “Crucial though their role may be, during the course of the study there were regular reports of role conflicts; these indicated that bicultural workers were perceived to represent the institutions to which they were attached rather than their patients/clients” (Manderson & Allotey, 2003, p. 12). Manderson and Allotey describe a

refugee woman who spent her childhood in a Sudanese refugee camp before migrating as a teenager to Australia. In response to certain physical symptoms, this woman was misdiagnosed as anorexic by an Australian psychiatrist, resulting in neglect of appropriate medical care while in Australia to address her symptoms. The refugee woman received successful treatment in Egypt and this news spread through the immigrant community confirming fears that western providers misdiagnosed immigrant patients with mental illness and provided inadequate care (Manderson & Allotey, 2003). The results of this study showed that, while the sharing of narratives may have the deleterious effect of spreading negative gossip, it may also support and strengthen individuals within the community towards self-advocacy. The immigrants' willingness to share their narratives with service providers also offered the valuable opportunity to enhance cultural competency in physical and mental health care.

Falicov (2007) recommends that therapeutic work with immigrant families incorporate relational, community, and cultural/sociopolitical work. The relational context involves an exploration of changing definitions and acculturative stresses of family life, and shifting gender and generational relationships. The community context stresses the importance of immigrants rebuilding community social networks and family therapists learning about and, when appropriate, collaborating with community programs. "Community programs may have therapeutic effects in themselves, be a help to the therapy goals, or be an alternative to therapy" (p. 169). The cultural and sociopolitical contexts of a specific immigrant group should be incorporated into the therapeutic experience in the form of stance that is collaborative and non-expert with a focus on resisting oppression and promoting social justice. "Exposure to racism and

discrimination is part of the everyday life of many immigrants. These experiences affect physical and mental health and relationships within the family or with institutions, and often negatively form and transform identities for immigrants and their children” (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, in Falicov, 2007, p. 166).

Gonzales, Dumka, Mauricio, and German (in Lansford, 2007) explore strategies for promoting resiliency, ethnic identity and pride, and family cohesion among immigrant families. Gonzalez et, al. describe family effectiveness training programs designed to support Latin American immigrant families struggling with acculturation-related family conflict between parents and adolescent children. This training program proved successful in strengthening communication between generations and building bicultural identities for parents and adolescents. By drawing on inherent family strengths, the Bridges/Puentes program was designed to enhance family relationships and cohesion, and serve as a protective factor for children at risk among Mexican-origin families in the United States (Gonzales, et al., in Lansford, 2007). The creators of the Bridges/Puentes program “employed a bicultural empowerment framework as a guiding program philosophy . . . to support families of Mexican origin to obtain new resources (skills, knowledge), while also acknowledging and building on their existing cultural strengths to direct their own lives” (Gonzales, et al., in Lansford, 2007, p. 280). Such programs may be generalizable to interventions with other immigrant groups, with careful sensitivity and attunement to particular distinctions among cultures.

Summary

There is a paucity of literature on the acculturation experiences of Somali refugee families regarding parenting transitions and familial conflict resolution. This lack of literature may result from the relatively recent phenomenon of Somali immigration to the United States, which began mainly in 2000. Another reason for the scarcity of research may be due to the reluctance of many Somali refugees to disclose and reveal private, personal familial issues of conflict to western researchers. Speaking ill of family members, particularly parents, in public is strongly discouraged in traditional African society, thereby hindering honest expression of difficult feelings and conflicts around family dynamics. Such privacy and deference to parents may impede open communication for research. Traditionally, throughout Africa, family conflicts are considered private matters to be addressed by elders within the family and community, and the concept of western-style therapy is foreign (Nwadiora, 1996). Therefore, Somali refugees may be skeptical that participating in research would benefit them (Bhui, 2006). Given the context of oppression, trauma and displacement in refugee camps, many Somali refugees may approach research participation involving personal and private disclosure with distrust.

A family perspective is especially useful in understanding mental health among refugees and the processes that promote resilience in refugee children and parents. As De Haene and colleagues (2007) noted, “Family research can elucidate the different types of protective factors that act as buffers to the multiple stressors associated with the refugee experience” (p. 240). Recent research about common values and acculturation issues across Sub-Saharan African communities and collectivist societies in general may be

relevant to the experience of Somali immigrants in particular. This background provides a context for exploring the specific experience of Somali refugee families and their strengths and challenges balancing acculturation with transmission of traditional culture across generations. Social workers, school and community mental health service providers must integrate therapy and services with cultural sensitivity and competency in order to most effectively serve this growing population (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The research question for this study was: How do Somali immigrant parents from the Bantu clan maintain a balance of preserving traditional culture and values while adapting to American ways of parenting? A qualitative, exploratory study was conducted using flexible methods through interviews with Somali refugee parents to explore the ways in which family systems shift, with changing roles for men, women, parents and children. Particular attention was paid to issues of identity of children as Somali or American, preservation of Somali and Muslim values and culture, and the erosion of traditional intergenerational extended family structures of elders, incorporating grandparents, aunts, and uncles who traditionally held powerful influence over family matters. Semi-structured, open-ended questions elicited narrative responses that described the challenges and strengths of Somali Bantu refugee parents and communities.

Sample

Nine Somali refugee parents from six families were interviewed. I conducted three interviews with married couples and three interviews of individuals. Two of the individuals were mothers and one a father. Three interviews were conducted with husband and wife couples in their homes. Three interviews with individuals, comprised of one man and two women, were conducted at their places of work. The settings were determined according to convenience and preference of the interviewees. Qualitative

research design was warranted for the study in order to deeply probe the subjective experience of Somali refugee parents and the ways in which they make meaning of parenting in the U.S. Narrative research was a well-suited method because Somali immigrants come from a highly oral society that values rhetorical skills and poetry as a form of making meaning out of experience and transmitting culture, values and tradition (Nwoye, 2006). Story-telling, proverbs and poetry recitation by elders impart wisdom across generations. Therefore, gathering narrative data from participants is especially appropriate. The questions contained in the interview guide were open-ended to elicit narrative responses that describe, in depth, the challenges, shifts, changes, and transitions of parenting styles among Somali Bantu immigrants.

I interviewed nine Somali refugee parents who reside in the greater Springfield area of Western Massachusetts and Connecticut who immigrated to the United States between 1984 and 2006. The sample was purposive, non random, and gathered through networking within the Somali community. I interviewed Somali refugee parents because they are the experts of their experience; they can reflect on family changes and challenges in adapting to the U.S. and compare their current family life with their lifestyle in Africa.

The director of the New Americans program of Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts, Mohamud Mohammed, who was instrumental in the resettlement of Somali Bantus to Springfield, served as the liaison with the Somali Bantu community. Mr. Mohamed helped to validate and legitimize my research, gain the trust and willingness of the community, and more easily access subjects. He directed me to one of the leaders of the Somali Bantu Organization of Springfield who provided an entree into

the community by welcoming me into his home along with other Somali immigrants to discuss my research.

Mr. Mohamed also referred me to a member of this community to serve as an interpreter for my interviews with participants who were not fluent in English. I used his services with one husband and wife couple. In the case of two of the couples, the husbands were proficient in English while their wives were not. The husbands interpreted for their wives and translated their wives' comments to me. This lack of English competency among three of the women was an obstacle to thoroughly inclusive interviewing. This, as well as the cultural challenge that Somali women traditionally are not outspoken in the presence of men, added to my limitations in honestly capturing women's voices. In order to draw the wives out equally, I sometimes asked the husbands to interpret to them before answering themselves and I requested that the wives respond before their husbands. All of the men complied willingly when I respectfully reminded them. However, in some cases, the men eagerly responded first. Furthermore, as I do not understand Somali, I was not able to assess how accurately my questions or the women's answers were being translated. While I do not suspect that the interpretations of my questions or of the women's responses were intentionally inaccurate, I wondered, possibly based on my own skepticism and bias, about the veracity of the translation.

Another factor that possibly contributed to bias was my positioning in the rooms in relation to the interviewees. This arrangement was also symbolic of the dynamic among us. In each case with the three couples, I sat closest to the men, possibly because they were my contacts and, they spoke more English than their wives. The women sat to

the side, one on a lower stool compared with normal chairs the men and I sat in, attending intermittently to children, nursing babies and occupying themselves with sewing.

The interviews with English-speaking women gave me the chance to speak directly with them without interruption or distraction because the interviews were not conducted in the presence of their children. I may have received more progressive responses from them because this correlates with their being educated and English speaking. In light of these obstacles, I especially valued the opportunity to independently interview two women who were fluent in English.

Data Collection

In order to enhance the credibility of the interview guide, Mohamud Mohamed, director of the New Americans Program of Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts, served as an expert reviewer. I discussed my questions beforehand with him and incorporated his feedback. Mr. Mohamed also assisted me in recruitment and coordinating an interpreter as needed. He advised me to meet in the homes of participants, recommending this as a more familiar, comfortable and convenient location for most couples, particularly for mothers occupied with childcare. He warned that some might be distrustful and uncomfortable with being tape recorded, given this community's history of persecution. All of the participants agreed to be tape recorded except for one, in which case careful notes were taken.

The questions were open-ended to elicit narrative, in-depth responses from the participants that describe the challenges, shifts, changes, and transitions of parenting styles among Somali Bantu immigrants. The questions explored the following themes:

Comparison of parenting styles between Somali immigrants and Somalis in Africa

- Tell me about the ways you parent your children here in the U.S. and how is this different from or similar to the way you were raised?

Comparison between Somali family systems and family values and those typical of western society in the U.S.:

- Tell me about the ways that you behave differently and have different values as a parent from parents who were born here in the U.S.
- Are the values of your family and the roles family members play in your family different from non-African immigrant families?
- Have roles changed in your family for children and parents and husbands and wives since resettlement? How?

Acculturation into U.S. society and the preservation and transmission of traditional family values and culture

- Is it important to you to pass along your cultural values of your clan, Islam, rituals, tradition, and heritage to your children? If so, how do you do this?
- Do you feel that your children are more Somali Bantu, more American, or a balance integrating both?)

Adjustment to changes in family systems

- Were you raised with a large extended family?
- Do you have extended family living in your household or your neighborhood here?
- Conflict resolution within families

- How do you resolve conflicts that may arise in relationships between husband and wife and parent and child?

The efficacy and role the Council of Elders versus western social service systems in supporting families

- Does the Council of Elders mediate conflict and support Somali families in your community?
- If so, in what ways have you seen or experienced intervention by the Council of Elders?
- Relevance of sharing stories and experience of parenting in transition
- What do American and non-African helping professionals need to know about Somali Bantu culture and the refugee experience to best serve the community?
- How can social workers, school personnel, and other service professionals empower you in sustaining cultural continuity and parenting successfully?

Risks for Participation

Participants were informed that they might face risks associated with discussing possible issues of conflict within a family. For example, they were warned that, if a husband and wife were both present while sharing information that evoked tension, there might be ramifications in their interpersonal relationship during the interview or after it was over. The topics might stir mixed feelings of the past, home and family background. These questions did not directly address issues of trauma or loss, but, they were reminded, the process of reflecting on their experience raising a family in the United States might call to mind difficult memories.

Benefits of Participation

Participants were told that the opportunity to share their experience and tell their story might benefit them and their community. The interview might offer them the experience of understanding their strengths and challenges in a larger context and with a perspective that is validating and clarifying their values, commitments and goals. They were told that participation might benefit the community in general by shedding light on themes and issues that helping professionals and social service providers need to know to serve the community with greater cultural sensitivity and competency.

Informed Consent Procedures

I explained the informed consent before obtaining a written signature from all participants. They signed the informed consent in my presence before the interview. I kept one copy and one copy was given to the participants for their records.

Precautions Taken to Safeguard Confidentiality and Identifiable Information

In order to safeguard identifiable information, I removed names and other identifying information and assigned code numbers to each tape and transcript. I kept Informed Consents separate from completed transcripts and tapes. I informed participants that my research advisor will have access to my data after identifying information is removed. I ensured that identifying information was confidential but, in the case of a couple being interviewed together, they necessarily heard each others' responses, as did an interpreter who interpreted for one couple. The interpreter also signed a confidentiality agreement form stating that he agreed to maintain the anonymity of all participants, to keep the content of the interviews confidential, and not to disclose

the names of the participants or disclose to others what they said during interviews in a way that would reveal their identity. I disguised vignettes so that participants could not be identified by excluding information that would disclose their identity. For example, I did not specify where participants lived or their professions. I informed participants that data would be stored in a secure place and that all data and tapes would be kept secure for three years as required by Federal regulations and that after that time, they would be destroyed or continue to be kept secured as long as needed, after which time, data would be destroyed. I explained to participants that participation was voluntary, they could refuse to answer any interview questions, and they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by indicating in writing that they no longer wished to participate, which would result in all materials related to them being destroyed immediately. They were told that they had until March 15, 2010 to withdraw from the study. Data was not collected until the HSR approval letter was received.

Data Analysis

I strove to integrate both emic and etic perspectives (Rubin & Babbie, 2007) in the process of creating the interview guide, conducting the interviews, and interpreting data. From an *emic* perspective of taking an insider's view, I attempted to approach the interviewees with as much understanding as possible about the cultural context of the Somali community, with an awareness of Muslim practice and values and knowledge of Somali refugee history. From an *etic* perspective of maintaining an outsider's objectivity, I invited the interviewees to explain and elaborate their responses as though their audience lacked prior knowledge of the Somali refugee experience. This approach

also allowed for the interviewees to view their experience from a new perspective, by answering questions they may not have previously considered.

I gathered data by careful and thorough note taking and tape recording interviews. Data were analyzed by conducting a content-theme analysis that involved looking for common patterns and themes among participants under the major categories described above. Then, I organized and compared themes and concepts that emerged in the process and noted how frequently participants mention these themes. The openness of a content/theme analysis, more inspired by exploration and inquiry than confirmation of a hypothesis, invited unexpected findings as well. Through this process, certain issues emerged among several respondents that were not specifically and directly targeted in the interview guide. For example, whereas interview questions did not directly address issues of domestic violence, several interviewees mentioned this topic in the context of conflict resolution and changes in gender roles in families. Medical practices and child birth also emerged as topics that were not directly addressed in the interview. When issues were repeated, this was noted as a pattern, and data were included in the findings.

In many cases, responses to certain questions overlapped with other questions, and these topics were organized according to themes more than simply according to the response to a particular question. For example, the first open-ended interview question that asked parents to describe their parenting style led some to mention their concern about passing along their heritage and religion. This response related more to the topic of cultural identity and transmission of culture and was organized in the findings in that section. Attempts were made to interpret the meaning behind the themes and attend to variations and contradictions in responses. I observed patterns linking certain responses

with participants sharing common characteristics. For example, it was noted that two women interviewees emphasized the emotional and psychological hardship of loneliness and isolation, whereas the men focused more on the practical and logistical challenges of raising a family without the support of extended family and neighbors. These interpretations of the findings are noted in the discussion section.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the changing experience of family life, acculturation process of adaptation to western individualistic values, and the preservation and transmission of traditional collectivist culture across generations among Somali refugees raising children in the United States. As there is a scarcity of research focusing on the social and cultural needs of this community in Western Massachusetts and Connecticut, this study contributes to existing literature about the experience of Somali refugees throughout the U.S.

This chapter presents data collected from interviews with nine Somali Bantu refugee parents. Demographic information was collected from each participant addressing their length of time in the U.S. and number and ages of their children. The interview questions were organized around the following themes: comparison of parenting styles between Somali immigrants and Somalis in Africa, comparison of Somali family systems and values and those typical of U.S. society, acculturation and preservation and transmission of traditional family values and culture, adjustment to changes in family systems regarding extended family, conflict resolution and role of Council of Elders, and implications for clinical social work practice.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The study was comprised of nine parents from six families, comprised of four fathers and five mothers. The mothers arrived in the U.S. between 1999 and 2006. Among the fathers, one arrived in 2001, one in 2003 and two in 2004. Six of the refugees were resettled in residences near other Somali Bantu refugees and three were more isolated from a Somali immigrant community. Even among those who lived near other Somalis, they were integrated in apartments where they were minorities. They all had approximately four young children born in the United States and some had older children in their teens born in Africa. All families interviewed had both sons and daughters.

Comparison of Parenting Styles between Somali immigrants and Somalis in Africa

The participants were asked to describe their parenting style in the United States and compare this to the way they were raised in Africa. All participants interpreted parenting as the responsibility and obligation to provide for the physical, moral and educational needs of their children. In all cases, both mothers and fathers emphasized parenting as a mutual responsibility, expressing that it was both parents' job to show the children the right, moral way to behave. All participants confirmed the importance of teaching their children to respect elders. One parent commented, "We teach them to respect people, like their parents, their teachers in school, anybody older than them." The same parent continued, "We train them to do homework, they have good grades in school." Success in school was also a value that all participants agreed was important for

parents to instill in their children. Another parent said, “I want them to be successful in their life, education, I have to train them, tell them what’s good, stop what’s bad.”

When asked how these ways of parenting are different from or similar to the ways that they were raised, all affirmed that they share the same values and priorities of their parents, particularly regarding the emphasis on respecting elders. However, two fathers reported that they adapted to different styles of disciplining children in the United States from the customs they were raised with in Africa. One father mentioned that in Africa, it is not uncommon for a parent to raise a stick to threaten a child or even tap him with it as a punishment to instill obedience. In contrast, he claimed that his thinking shifted in this regard through exposure to life in the U.S. Whereas he used to adopt that method, he has become accustomed to what he describes as American culture, having lived here for seven years. He has come to believe that “beating” a child to make him listen is wrong and ineffective.

We have a different culture here than Africa because when we’re in Africa, the parents will be beating children to listen but that’s not 100% . . .(effective) . . .because if you tell, tell, tell something, he can listen to you but if you if you beat him, he’s not going to listen to you but if you tell him, he’s going to listen if you tell, tell, tell, at least it’s going to record so he can remember again in the brain. Now we have the culture of here – almost six years and I’m good enough knowledge of this country, I know the behavior of the people. (In Africa) it’s a different thing: some of the parents try to tell them what to do and the boy or girl doesn’t listen. They think they should take a stick to scare him to listen, (not beating like enemies or something like that) and I believe that is the difference. (If you tell him what to do,) as long as he has a good brain, he can listen.

When asked if he thinks he changed his style of parenting while here, he replied, “Yes.”

Another father confirmed that traditional Somali parenting tended to be more authoritarian, including the use of physical discipline, whereas he and his wife adopted

more authoritative style typical of American culture. “In our culture, we have different parenting skills, even though it depends from parent to parent; parents there tended to discipline their children just spanking them but here, many Somali parents do not physically discipline their children and for us, we discipline in a different way, by talking and motivating them to do what we think is right.”

Many parents wrestled with their children’s self-expression in their communications and interactions between parent and child. Striving to balance a respect for their children’s autonomy and individuality, more consistent with western, individualistic ideals, with adherence to the way they were raised with ultimate deference to the authority of elders, some parents expressed their sense of underlying, constant tension and self-doubt, along with a sense of being caught in between two worlds. One woman revealed her ambivalence about allowing and even encouraging her children to express themselves freely because it was so fundamentally discordant with her own upbringing.

I grew up in a culture where an elder is an elder, whether it is your mom, your neighbor, your uncle, your aunt, that you have to really respect. Sometimes I call to (my children and) tell them something and they want to say something back which I appreciate. I didn’t have that: I had to really listen and say nothing. I’m open to the idea that my kids and I can have a relationship of dialogue, which I never had, but sometimes I feel like they intimidate me. I say, “I’m your mom. First you listen to me then you can talk” and then one will say, “You have to listen to what I have to say too,” which is quite reasonable and really something good. But to the culture I grew up, that’s a no-no. So, I’m in dilemma of where am I; forget about the identity of my children. I feel like I’m lost in two worlds. I’m learning from them too, even though they are still young. It’s a learning experience for a different culture and different generation.

This theme may have been most common among participants who were particularly educated and embraced socially progressive values.

One father reflected on the different degree of responsibility he had as a child and the limited privileges and opportunities he had, in contrast to the more privileged and care-free experience of his own children. He spoke of his role at age fifteen as the provider of his family. “The expectation, in Somali culture, is that at age fifteen, you are supposed to be in charge of the family and make sure you provide for the family.” As the only male in the family, he was expected to provide for his mother and sister: every day after school, he helped his mother with farming, sparing her the most physically arduous labor. As a result, he missed out on the opportunity for typical childhood play. He contrasted the educational system he grew up with in Somalia, where his school lacked tables and textbooks and he was required to bring his own stool to sit on daily, with his children’s schooling. He explained that his learning was based on memorization in contrast with the emphasis on creativity and independent critical thinking in American schools.

He also noted the difference in teaching styles in Somalia compared to the U.S. In Somalia, he commented, teachers were absolute and students could be harshly admonished or whipped for disobedience. Another interviewee mentioned that she grew up in an environment in which children could expect to be disciplined by any adult he or she encountered, including an adult who the child might see in passing but didn’t know well. It was the norm for an adult who saw a child in the street to freely ask where he or she was going or to tell him or her they should go home. This reflects the collectivist nature of the Somali culture: children were considered to be subordinate to a larger

community of adults beyond their parents, and all adults shared accountability for and investment in raising children collectively with shared values.

The parents were asked to compare the way that they raise their children with the way American children who are not from African immigrant families are raised. All the participants confirmed the common theme that they prioritized and emphasized respect for elders more than non-African American children. One mother focused on the theme of selfishness characteristic of American culture compared with concern for others. “Here, the environment is, ‘I have to think of myself’ instead of, ‘I have to think of other people too.’ Every day, I remind my kids (of the importance of) sharing, loving, caring” Another mother mentioned the same theme: “Over here it is all about individualism.”

In one family, the husband stressed, in a tone of dismay, the difference between the lifestyle in the United States and Kenya. Before he came here, he had never encountered children arguing with parents or neglecting what they say. “Here, the lifestyle is different than in Kenya... In Africa, anything the parents say, the child will follow that order. Here, kids, once they hit fifteen, sixteen years, they do not accept their parents or give respect.” His wife agreed, saying, “Kids do whatever they want, they don’t respect parents.” Another man also noted that most children in the U.S. do not listen to their parents; they tell their parents what they want and ask for more, in contrast with African children. Another father said, “Children don’t respect parents; Parents don’t respect children. That’s not going to be good; that’s shameful. Respecting any person is the way I’m training my children now; I want them to be successful.”

One father explained the different cultural norms regarding appropriate ways for children to show respect. “If you see Somali children or teenagers looking down when

they are talking to you . . . that's actually very appropriate in our culture.” In contrast with American culture, he explained that Somali children are taught never to stare at adults when they are spoken to or look them directly in the eye rigidly too much. “You should keep eye contact but be modest and be respectful. Listen to the person first and then speak.” He also emphasized respect for neighbors as paramount. He and his wife taught their children to help out elderly neighbors, such as by shoveling snow for them, and to avoid raising their voices which might disturb them. This parent couple emphasized respecting their neighbors' property and appreciating boundaries. For example, they taught their children not to walk on their neighbors' lawns or let their balls roll into their neighbors' yards.

One father contrasted his emphasis on high academic achievement and hard work with the values of surrounding neighborhood children who are not from African families. “We're training them to . . . (do) . . . good homework. They have good grades in school; it's not like other children.” He said that he required that his children devote time to their homework more than neighborhood children typically did. “Some children, you see them riding bikes, playing games, and wasting time. If a person is going to be busy in his life, he can excel in school and be successful.” This same father also distinguished himself from African immigrant parents from the bush, in contrast to his background in Mogadishu. He claimed that some parents from the bush lacked the sophistication to know what to teach their children, whereas he viewed his background as more advanced.

One father began his response by expressing the common theme of children having greater autonomy here, but then diverged by also commenting on different roles for women in the United States. “There are different rules from Africa: (there), mom and

dad are always leaders of the family. Here, the power is for kids and mom; the man has no power. We may have to change because of living here. Men have power, but not that much – you have to catch up with the rules.”

Role Changes in the Family

The interviewees were asked if roles have changed in their families for children and parents and husbands and wives since resettlement and if so, how. In terms of changes in dynamics between parents and children, all participants alluded to a change in their children demonstrating more “American” qualities of self-assertiveness towards their parents in the form of asking for more and challenging parents more than children typically would in Africa. Many commented that their children were behaving in more typically American ways regarding communication and interactions with adults. One father mentioned:

Children are changing. Children in our culture, the expectation is that children will not talk back to their parents. It is not even acceptable in Somali culture for children to stare at their parents when they are talking to them. But now we see that children are very challenging. They say, “I don’t think so.” They disagree with you. I also know that in any culture, parents do not accept that children talk back. I’m not saying that in American culture it is okay that a kid talks back to parents but . . . we are seeing that while our children are nice and not rude to us, they are actually more acculturated and they are behaving more like American children, who are a little more challenging and have a different opinion.

Yet, one mother denied any weakening of her authority. Even in response to a question of whether the experience of the children speaking English better than the mother lessened her power, she said, “No, because they are children.” In contrast, another mother described her mixed feelings about her children’s assertiveness in their communications with her. She admitted with ambivalence, “The way I grew up, I had to

say nothing (in response to an elder). I appreciate that we have a dialogue but sometimes I feel like my children intimidate me.” This mother was highly westernized, as she was fluent in English and highly accomplished in her career, atypical of most Somali refugee women in the area. Interestingly, the distance between herself and her children in terms of acculturation might be expected to be smaller than with mothers like the one mentioned above, who spoke less English and did not work outside the home. Yet, she felt a tension between the way she was raised and some behaviors her children were developing. Thus, even mothers who strongly integrated into western society and internalized western values, felt tormented by changing roles giving greater autonomy to children. Perhaps these women felt an even greater tension because they strove to integrate both lifestyles and recognized the inherent compromise of sustaining such a balance.

One parent affirmed the common struggle of Somali refugee mothers’ diminished control of their children. This participant frequently heard mothers lament, “My children are not my children,” referring to fears that the Department of Children and Families would remove them. “If I don’t take them to a medical appointment that I don’t think is really necessary and I have other important things to do, (to take care of our immediate needs) someone will take them from me! Why am I here? In refugee camps I had control of my kids.” Others complained, “Because of the language, they (the children) intimidate me. They say, ‘If you don’t do this for me, I’ll call 911!’ Parents are afraid of their children!”

Regarding gender role adjustments and changes between husbands and wives, some spoke of adapting to shared childcare and employment roles in the U.S. In two

couples, the mothers had taken time away from child rearing to go to school or go to work outside the home, requiring the fathers to take on the childcare roles and requiring the family to seek outside childcare arrangements they might need to pay for. This was a change from their lifestyle in Africa, except that in some cases, women in Africa would join men to work in farming, involving others to share childcare responsibilities. What would not occur in Somalia, one man explained, was a woman going out to work in a factory at night, as his wife has done here in the U.S., largely because of differences in jobs.

He commented that, while his wife went out to work the night shift at a factory, he took care of the children. He did not express philosophical ambivalence about her role change, but he did emphasize how exhausting and stressful it was for him to take care of the children at night, after having gone to work the whole day. Nevertheless, he said that he was happy that his wife was working in order to bring in money. Another couple paid for child-care while the mother went to school. The husband in this couple said that he was willing to take care of the children if his wife was away. But if they were both home, that would not be necessary, implying that it was primarily her role. Several parents confirmed that paying for childcare so that the wife could go out to work or to school was foreign to their lifestyle in Africa. The typical arrangement that the participants were familiar with in Africa would be for extended family members or older children to take on that role.

Two men mentioned differences in the power of women in relation to men in the United States compared with Africa. One referred to different perceptions and attitudes about domestic violence.

In Africa, we have never met with a woman calling the police and the police telling the man he has to get of the house. There is no such rule in Africa. If anything happens between the wife and the husband, he has to be the powerful one. No chasing husband from the house.

Another man noted, with concern, that the mothers living in the U.S. have more power than in Africa. His comments were not clear enough to determine if he meant that in America, women have more power than women in Africa or more power than men.

One father emphasized the distinctions between perceptions of what constitutes unacceptable domestic violence in Somali culture and American society. He acknowledged that, “Women’s rights are not respected in Somalia the same way that they are in the United States.” He described the transformation many Somali immigrant women went through when they came here realizing that they have rights, resulting in numerous calls to 911. This father described these incidents as overreactions to minor disagreements between couples that they could have resolved themselves. He recalled one incident where the police responded to a wife’s call, but when they arrived, they could not find any criminal activity. This man stated that Somali women later learned which behaviors do and do not warrant 911 calls. Nevertheless, the standards for acceptable treatment of women are in general different in Somalia, he noted. Verbal and emotional abuse would not typically be considered as grave in Somalia as in the United States. This father explained that a small use of physical force by a husband on his wife would not be met with objection. However, in Somalia, serious physical abuse, including scars from beating and injuring a woman to the point of compromising her capacity to do her work are considered serious offenses that would merit retribution from the woman’s

brother or father. The extent of consequences facing him would be based on the relative weakness or power of her family of origin to protect her.

One mother described the difference between Somali and American culture in terms of gender roles of men and women working outside the home. She commented that in Somali culture, unlike some other Islamic cultures, women typically worked - often in farming. But men tended to be recognized as the breadwinners. She noted that in America, some Somali men felt intimidated by their wives' increased responsibility and power. A male respondent confirmed that many Somali women took charge of finances and important official documentation and rationed the money their husbands brought home out of a sense that women were more reliable.

One father noted a strong difference between Somalia and the U.S. regarding the culture of dating among young people. He explained that he will not allow his son or daughter to date, in accordance with Somali culture in which it is forbidden. This father added that his children do actually respect their culture in this way and they do abide by these expectations to abstain from dating. Another man also mentioned a difference between gender roles and couple relationships regarding "boyfriends" and "girlfriends" outside of marriage. He said that in the U.S., a wife can have a boyfriend but in Africa, the expectation is that married men and women do not have boyfriends or girlfriends. "To kick the man from the house, to have a boyfriend, that is against the religion."

Preservation and Transmission of Traditional Values and Religion

The participants were asked if it is important to them to pass along cultural values, rituals, traditions and language of their family, clan, and Islam to their children, and if so, how they achieve this. All parents definitively confirmed that it was essential

to teach their children that they are Muslim. At the same time, they all regretted that they could not provide the religious education they grew up with in Africa. They all agreed that it was difficult to achieve this here because of limitations in resources and time available to children and parents for Islamic study. One father explained, “The most important thing is the Koran. The main thing is, if you don’t know how to pray, you can’t be Muslim. You have to go to mosque, learn how to pray, and recite Koran. Otherwise, being a Muslim for them is not going to show.” In one couple, the woman affirmed, “We are trained to learn the Koran and we need to teach them.” The husband elaborated,

And still, we don’t have enough time as we used to have in our country, maybe one, two days a week. Instead of watch TV or play games, I try to teach them, here and at the mosque. Every Sunday we stay for four hours at the mosque and teach the Koran. Some states have different school two days a week, instead of one day, and some places, they go all week. They go everyday and learn what they learn at the public school, at the Islamic school.

When asked if he would do this if he could, he answered, “Actually, yes but we don’t have funds to do that. In Africa they learn more. A person has general school in the morning and in the afternoon they have to go to the *duqsi*” (Koranic school system traditionally comprising Islamic education in Somalia).

Two interviewees mentioned that they lack a communal space for providing religious education. He regretted that there is no *duqsi* close by where the children can learn Koran. He admitted that parents can teach their children at home but only on the weekends, because of public school and work schedules, as opposed to every day, as he was accustomed to in Kenya. In one family, both the husband and wife commented that they had grown up going to *duqsi*. One father regretted that he was not providing his

children with the thorough, rigorous religious education he received. Describing his children's lessons at the Islamic Center they attend every Sunday, he said, "My children are supposed to be fluent in Koran but they are not. I feel guilty; I know more Koran than the people teaching."

One mother commented that she sent her children to an Islamic center on Sundays, but they had only learned ten or twenty percent of what she felt they should. She recounted that she grew up going to Islamic school daily, except for Fridays, for two hours after general school and chores. An advanced student, she had mastered learning the entire Koran by age eight. All the parents confirmed that their lifestyle in America involves obstacles of time, transportation and money that impede providing their children with the intensive religious education they would prefer. Despite the common disappointment that the amount of time devoted to religious study and prayer is less than ideal, all participants stressed that they make sure their children know their religion and the history of Islam and pray together.

One man revealed how different and difficult an adjustment it is for him to adapt to a non-Muslim lifestyle. He expressed that he would prefer to observe Muslim holidays more traditionally but faces obstacles here such as expectations that he work on Friday, which is the main holy day of rest. He explained that if he has a job and his supervisor expects him to go to work on Friday, he has to go, despite his preference to abstain from work. He commented, "We don't do it here because we are the minority." Two of the interviewees commented that, despite the challenge of observing Muslim rituals and practices here in the same way as in Africa, they do observe the major festivals of the *Haj*, *Ramadan* and *Eid*. One father mentioned that children miss school on these days.

One mother commented that she and her husband pass along their Somali culture to their children through story-telling.

We share a lot of stories. We are an oral people; we are called a nation of poets. Every story you tell your children has meaning. I read to them Somali books, folktales. Friday nights, we have family night, we all sit and share stories and we talk about how we grew up in the village.

She described her children's reaction of disbelief and disgust to learning about a lifestyle she and her husband grew up in without indoor toilets and a cuisine of camel meat and camel milk. She and her husband consciously recounted the stories of their lives in African to their children.

This question elicited responses focused on the needs of their community. One man said that if they had a community space, an office space and transportation, they would have the means to more effectively sustain their religious and cultural life as a community. He spoke of creating an African Refugee Day celebration on June 20 here as they have in Africa, where they would gather in front of City Hall and demonstrate traditional African drumming, poetry, medicine and women's crafts.

Identity of Children: Somali, American, or Both

The participants were asked if they felt that their children were more Somali Bantu, more American, or a balance integrating both. Nearly all answered, "More American." One woman said, "They are mostly American. If they went back to Africa, the kids would not want to stay. They would not accept (lack of material comforts and privileges) because they have adapted to the lifestyle of the United States." She elaborated, "We get everything free here; we have education, they all go to school . . . In

African, it's hard to get a good job." Another mother explained, "They go to school, speak the language, do what American boys do."

Her husband answered next, stating that they were more Somali Bantu, based on the way non-Africans perceived his family. "If I go with children to school, other children will say, that's an African guy." His first response focused on the way others viewed his children, through a lens of race and nationality, more than the way he thought his children viewed themselves. A female respondent shared her son's experience in school as the target of racist comments by a classmate. The classmate directed a derogatory statement at him, in her words, because he was Black. While the mother was satisfied with the school's response, she acknowledged that she and other Somali immigrants were on the lookout for racism and specifically anti-Muslim expression, particularly since 9/11. For example, she was aware of Somali-Americans being bullied for wearing the *hijab*. She explained in the interview that her son's experience was new for her family: in Somalia, she claimed, "We never experienced racism."

The father who responded at first that his children were more Somali because they would inevitably be perceived as African, conceded, "The younger ones are more American because they watch American TV and use English more." In another family, a father said that his fourteen year old daughter was the only one among the children who was more Somali. He described her as more conservative, noting that she prays, covers her hair, is focused on her education, and does not absorb everything from American culture. She stood out as the exception among all the families. These two fathers were the only ones to express an alternative response to this question of identity other than stating that their children were more American.

In contrast, he described the American born daughter, who is five, along with the brothers as “more acculturated and assimilated,” stating that “they absorb too much.” He noted examples in their use of harsh and disrespectful language, teasing each other, stubbornness towards parents, and disorganization in terms of their rooms and personal belongings. This father assessed his sons as 30% Somali and 70% American. When asked if he perceived the differences in acculturation as based on gender, he explained it more according to their age, age upon arriving in the U.S., and personality. Although his fourteen year old daughter was not the oldest, she adhered more than the others to Somali traditional values. This may reflect her particular uniqueness more than patterns according to age or gender.

One mother of adolescents assessed them as eighty percent American and twenty percent Somali. This was exemplified, particularly as teenagers, in their desire for autonomy and independence. She mentioned their lifestyle of wanting to stay out late with friends. Their failures, at times, to express respect towards adults in accordance with their culture of origin also represented their American identity.

Aware of this delicate balance between assimilating and integrating, one mother of young pre-adolescent children anticipated even greater tension when they would become teenagers. She worried that they would be swayed by American cultural influences and asserted that she disapproved of drinking, immodest dress, and having girlfriends and boyfriends. She expressed her worries about her children’s cultural and ethnic identity and values:

You go through ups and downs but most of the time it’s the downs. Now my friends who have older kids, they say, you haven’t seen nothing yet, you wait till they are teenagers. You worry about culture shock, loss of identity, you want

your child to have your heritage, you want your child to be proud of where they came from and you're in a dilemma. I want my kids to have American culture but I don't want them to lose their roots. I want my child to be proud of his heritage and his culture, and you're in dilemma. I foresee it every single day. I remind my kids about how we grew up and the meaning of sharing, loving and caring (because here,) we are in an environment of me, myself. I have to be thinking of myself (but) we have to think of other people too. They can have American culture; I know they grew up here and this is their country. But I want them to look back and say, this is where my mom and dad come from. I don't want them to lose that part of identity.

The failure to pass along the Somali language to the next generation was one of the strongest examples of children's assimilation. This same mother expressed, "I am sad that they do not understand my language" She lamented that when her mother and sister are on the phone, her children cannot communicate with them.

I feel guilty about it. Sometimes people say, "Why don't they speak Somali? And they make you feel like a bad parent. So I say, "they speak the language of the country they're born in" but in my heart, I say, "It's really true; I should have done a better job." You have that guiltiness in you. That's the problem, (that I speak English to them). I think I should have a rule that when we get home, it's only Somali. Some families do that, but those families have Somali neighbors; they have their own mini Somalia. But we are alone. It's really a struggle, every single day.

At the occasional times when her children did call her by the Somali term for "mother," she seemed to be unexpectedly moved by the emotion of that endearment, suggesting that she had not predicted beforehand the cost to her maternal experience of her children calling her the English term, "Mom" instead. She recounted her reaction recently, when her son called her "*Hooyo*." She said, "It has a different kind of feeling when they call me mom or '*Hooyo*.' I really relate more." She explained how hurt she felt when her son innocently, without any ill intention, referred to her sister as "your sister" rather than calling her his aunt. "At that age, I was calling the neighbor "aunt", inferring that, as a child, she used more familial terms to describe neighbors than her son was using

for his own aunt. This also reflected the closeness that was common between neighbors in Somalia in contrast with the distance between neighbors and relatives in the U.S.

Another mother expressed the same concerns that she did not adequately pass along the Somali language to her children. Unlike the former mother, this mother and her husband did speak only Somali to their children at home, which the children learned to understand completely. Yet they did not learn and were resistant to speak Somali. She regretted that they did not pass along the language the way other immigrant groups more successfully have. With envy, she wondered how the Hispanic community around her managed to raise children as bilingual. She recounted that her children correctly explained to her that Hispanic children had more community and more support of their language and culture than Somali immigrants.

This mother, whose children were born in America and under the age of ten, affirmed that they are more American than Somali in terms of their sense of entitlement and privilege.

She actively tried to instill in her children the values of mutual responsibility and caring. At times, her children internalized these values, showing concern for their cousin's poverty, as her son offered to send them some of his holiday money. At other times, they behaved more as typical American children would, taking their privileges for granted.

Sometimes I will tell my kids, "You are Somalis." At times I feel sad about it because I don't have a country to take them. If I take them to Africa, it's not the same as Somalia. I want my kids to grow up responsible, to see what other kids in the world are going through. I am happy they are born here . . . but they take so many things for granted. I give them breakfast and they say, "Is there an alternative today? Can I have waffles instead of pancakes?" (And I say,) "Kids, you know your cousins are starving!" My sister's children may not have food to put today on the table. And, thank God, they're picking up on that and they're realizing. My son had some extra money and he said, "Mom, can you please send

this to my cousins so they can have clothes and food to eat?” and that made me cry. I said to myself, “As a family, what we’re doing is good.” My son is realizing that there are other children in the world who are not so lucky as they are. But there are days when I think, “Spoiled kids!” and my husband tells me, “It’s their lot; it’s their life. Don’t torture them.” . . . And, he’s right. They belong here.

Despite her concern that her children had assimilated to the point of losing their Somali roots, she recounted her sense of gratitude, delight, appreciation, and relief to unexpectedly discover her eight year old son’s connection with his African heritage amidst the 2008 presidential campaign. When she asked him why he supported Obama, he replied, “Because Obama is me! Obama came from Africa and you and Dad came from Africa.” She was proud and impressed that he both appreciated his African identity and also could embrace his best friend who voted in their school’s mock election for McCain. She celebrated his affiliation with his African roots along with his tolerance of diversity as a sign of social responsibility.

Adjustment to Changes with Extended Family

The participants were asked if they were raised with large extended families and if they have extended family living in their households or neighborhoods here. If their situation is different here than in Africa, they were asked how this change impacts them. With the exception of one woman who had lost her parents and grew up only with her brother in her home, all the participants said that they were raised in large families, which they lacked here. Most were raised at least in part by a grandmother and after their marriages, lived with a mother or mother-in-law. They all stressed their belief in the value of extended family, including absolute respect for and obligation toward elder relatives. All participants, both men and women, emphasized separation from extended

family and ensuing loneliness and isolation as among their greatest struggles in acculturation. All lamented the loss of emotional, psychological, and practical support of extended family; some mothers emphasized the emotional loss, whereas fathers focused on the practical, logistical struggles of raising children without extended family.

Loneliness and isolation were particularly relevant themes around childbirth and childrearing of young children. Fathers expressed this theme of isolation from extended family more in terms of the practical challenges of child-care and lacking neighbors and relatives to help out when parents are working or generally overwhelmed. Mothers focused more on the profound loss of giving birth, caring for new babies, and raising children without the psychological and emotional support of family and neighbors surrounding them as they expected to be the norm. In four families, the husbands adopted a more modern and egalitarian role in child-care, taking the place of sisters, mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. While these families valued sharing responsibilities between husbands and wives more than might be traditional, it was, nonetheless, a trade-off.

One mother recalled the intensity of loneliness that accompanied childbirth and her children's early months in the U.S.

Being a parent in the U.S. is not an easy task at all to say the least. We grew up in a culture of having your extended family, all your relatives caring for you but here in the U.S., it was not a good experience at all. At the hospital, all these things were foreign, with nobody to help you: just you and your husband. I am grateful that my husband has been a blessing but then he had to go back to work.

Her suffering over the absence of sisters, her mother, and mother-in-law was such that she would have preferred living in a war zone in the company of her family of origin, to the isolation of her life as a new mother in the U.S. Suffering from medical

complications of an exceedingly painful and prolonged labor, c-section, medical complications related to an epidural including a spinal headache, and postpartum depression, all without her mother or sisters, was devastating.

The birthing experience was terrible. It was really horrible. I remember crying every single night, saying, "I want to go back home, I want to be back home, I want to be next to my parents," even though I know in my heart they are not in a safe place. But I preferred the gun-shots, the artillery than being here in a safe place because of the loneliness. . . It's not easy; being a new mother in a foreign land: I have no family other than my husband and children.

She recalled how her mother used to go to her sisters to care for them when they had their babies.

(In Africa), all you do is feed the baby. You don't worry about cooking, at least for the first six weeks; you are being attended to, you need food, people would be around you. Here, I didn't have that. The only support I had was my husband - who I so appreciate - but then he had to go back to work.

"I preferred living in a war zone with gunshots and artillery if I could have had the company of my family." For her, the contrast around childbirth in the U.S. and Somalia was extreme and painful. Despite her husband's support when their children were born, the absence of her family of origin and husband's family overwhelmed her with longing and depression.

One father stated, "Here it is very hard for us as parents because we don't have the support of our relatives . . . We are seeing that it is tough when you don't have grandparents around and both parents don't drive. We feel very isolated." One mother, without family in the U.S. except for one sister living in another state far away, commented that there is more family help for childcare in Africa. As a result, she spends more time with her children here than she expected, because she lacks the extra support. One man described the difficulty here of taking care of children without extra family

support or the support of neighbors. He explained, “If you get sick or your child is sick and you need to go to the hospital, you can’t leave kids by themselves in the house, (whereas) in Africa, you can call someone else, call the neighbors, but you don’t do that here.”

In terms of finding outside assistance for childcare, another parent mentioned that they had tried a community childcare program but preferred to get help from a Somali Bantu friend. One parent mentioned the conflict he and his wife encountered when the half-day Head Start program his daughter attended discontinued providing transportation. Since his wife did not drive and he could not leave work in the middle of the day to transport his daughter home, they felt compelled to withdraw her from the program. He cited transportation as the biggest impediment to offering his children extra opportunities such as afterschool sports and other enrichment programs and activities.

The cultural norms regarding relationships with and care of elders was a theme that arose with two female respondents in particular. They were horrified by the treatment of elders in American culture. One woman spoke of the culture of nursing homes as deeply troubling and anathema to her. According to Islam and her Somali heritage, neglecting elders was unthinkable. Even so, one woman stressed that she understood that the tendency of Americans to arrange for elders to live in nursing homes was not malicious. She acknowledged that the people who made such decisions for their elderly parents, rather than bring them into their own homes as she would, were not cruel; it was simply a part of American culture, but one that she could not fathom.

Conflict Resolution within Families

Participants were asked how they resolve conflicts that may arise in relationships between husband and wife and parent and child. Among the couples, all respondents to this question were men. They concurred that in cases of conflict between husbands and wives, they mostly would call their parents to help mediate, if possible, or talk about it and solve the problem together. In more severe cases of disputes, they said they would call on the Council of Elders to sit down together to discuss it, offer advice, and tell the couple what to do. In contrast, two female respondents commented that they would not seek council from elders to resolve marital disputes. Acknowledging that their marriages were untraditional and atypically modern in this regard, they said that they preferred to solve disagreements with their husbands between the two of them, on their own.

One man used this question as an opportunity to reiterate his frustration with the police in intervening in affairs that he believes should be handled by the Council of Elders. “We need to make connection between the elders and the police department. We want the police to call us so that we can deal with the issue.” He continued, “Anytime a woman calls the police, we want the police to contact the elders.” When asked what the elders would do, he answered,

They have to call both people who are part of the fighting, asking questions, one by one, first, they ask of the wife and then the man and they think about it and see who has been the aggressive one. They must investigate both of them and, the one who has been involved in the fighting, they’re going to talk to that one and find out how the fighting started, and how to manage the family. Without investigating both of them, they don’t make any . . . (recommendation). We do the same thing in Africa too.

One female respondent acknowledged that the Council of Elders in this community in America did not always advocate for women in domestic conflicts. She noted that the elders sent a message to women who complained of domestic violence not

to report this to the police because of the disruption and dishonor to the men and community. From her perspective, the elders condoned, or at least tolerated the violence and neglected to effectively educate men against such behavior. At the same time, she and another female respondent confirmed the perspective of several male respondents, conceding that some Somali immigrant women exploited the new power they enjoyed in the U.S. over their husbands by calling 911 and falsely alleging abuse. The female respondents explained that sometimes Somali women made these calls without realizing that the police would come.

Relevance of Sharing Experiences of Parenting in Transition:

Implications for Social Work Practice

Finally, the interviewees were asked what they feel non-Somali Americans need to know to better serve the community. All respondents emphasized the need for providers to develop trust through cultural competency. Some male respondents reiterated the need to coordinate communication between the police with the elders of the community. One said, “We need the American people to know who the elders of the community are. Any problem, like any fighting in the community, we want to know and we want to deal with it and see what we can do. Anything that happens in schools, we want to deal with it. Those working in the community need to know the elders.”

Two mothers spoke of cultural competency among medical and mental health and social service professionals serving the community as essential. One mother recommended that health care professionals understand, with greater sensitivity, the perceptions Somali immigrant families may have about medicine, particularly regarding

childbirth. She explained how, in Somalia, cesarean sections were understood to lead inevitably to the death of mother and/or baby. Recognizing this orientation would go a long way in terms of providing compassionate and empathetic care to a Somali woman for whom a c-section is recommended or necessary. One mother stated that she and her husband struggled to tell her mother in Africa that she gave had a c-section because of the anxiety that instilled back home. For her, the birthing experience at the hospital was especially alienating, frightening, and invalidating.

You feel the hospital environment is not friendly, even though it might be, but then you worry about the c-section. I had the spinal headache but I didn't know what it was and I would have excruciating pain. My husband was complaining (to the doctor, saying) "She is not okay. Maybe it has something to do with the epidural, and (the) doctor brushed it off and to this day, we regret, why didn't we say something about it? But when something is so new to you, (thank God at least we know the language), it isn't easy at all! I think of other Somali (mothers) who have the language barrier, the cultural shock it's not easy at all. I feel the pain for (other Somali women).

In the context of childbirth and health care, she mentioned that Somali immigrant women generally preferred female medical providers. She also recommended increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity about female circumcision among health care providers. Among all the participants, only one other interviewee referred to this sensitive and controversial subject. In response to the question about differences in lifestyle between America and Somalia, one man stated that this was a significant change and that it is prohibited in the United States. He did not elaborate on his opinion about this except to emphasize it as a change that his community adapts to with immigration here. This topic merits extensive exploration in its own right.

Another Somali woman responded to the question by advising service providers, DCF workers, police, and other authorities to be culturally sensitive of different values and beliefs. She urged those working with members of the Somali immigrant community to treat them with respect: “Don’t judge them; it is better to first ask their point of view.” She described the devastating impact a worker for the Department of Children and Families (DCF) had on a Somali mother being investigated for abuse and neglect. The tone of the investigation had the effect of challenging the mother’s capacity to protect her children. This was exceedingly hurtful, given her experience of sacrifice and struggle to survive and protect her children through years in a refugee camp. Another female respondent similarly recommended that DCF workers should not jump to conclusions about allegations of parental abuse. She mentioned, “They should not just take the word of the kids; parents have already lost power.” This respondent also advised service providers and authorities, such as medical providers and Department of Transitional Assistance workers, against using children as interpreters.

She also spoke of the implicit judgment she faced as a mother regarding family planning and the choice to have numerous children. Citing an Islamic belief that “The Creator is the provider and Allah will provide sustenance,” she explained that comments admonishing women against having multiple children because of the expense may be perceived as extremely hurtful. The warning that having more children is too expensive is neither compelling nor the greatest obstacle, she said. “Shelter and food are not the biggest worries,” she explained. Discussions should focus more, she stressed, on the challenges of isolation, alienation, and preservation of culture and identity.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Expectations of Findings

One expected finding was that parents attempted to pass along their religion and culture but became resigned to the limits of their efforts. Priorities of meeting the basic physical needs of the family such as securing housing, income, and school enrollment were predicted to most likely take precedence over meeting the spiritual and cultural needs of the family. Parents were expected to report struggle and conflict in teaching Islam and passing along traditional Somali values without large community support and resources and amidst competing American cultural influences. Another expected finding was that many individuals and families accessed the support and guidance of the Council of Elders as opposed to social workers or other Western professionals in local community agencies. When Somalis did work with non-African social workers, they were expected to approach the relationship with skepticism and distrust. The most common experience of Somali immigrants who had been in therapy in the U.S. was anticipated to be that it was not helpful because the therapist and therapy model were not sufficiently culturally competent.

The language barrier was presumed to be a significant obstacle in conducting interviews. While interviewing parent couples together, the men were more fluent in English than the women. This impacted the conversations. I tended to speak directly with the men more and ask them to translate to their wives. With one couple, the

husband dutifully addressed my questions to his wife as I requested of him to before offering his own reply. Nevertheless, he elaborated more than she and he also sat closer to me and gave me his full attention while she was distracted by the children.

In one case, I used an interpreter during an interview with a couple and he and the husband sat next to each other while the wife sat to the side on a low stool, occupied with nursing a baby and sewing. In another family, the wife sat on the bed engaged in sewing and tending to the children, while the husband sat in a chair across from me. Thus, with each of the three couples, the husbands positioned themselves closer and more directly in relation to me while the wives were more peripheral. The women all spoke less and, with the exception of one couple, they answered after their husbands. Since the men translated for the women, I did not know exactly how they interpreted my questions, nor could I understand the women's responses. These issues potentially compromised the honesty and openness of the responses.

My own bias toward valuing children's individuality and autonomy and valuing women's independence and empowerment may have influenced the research and conflicted with the findings. The small sample number of participants may hinder generalizability, but it will still offer worthwhile insight into an immigrant experience that is unique in some ways, but common and relevant to many other immigrant groups as well.

Hopefully, this study will contribute to the understanding of the challenges Somali immigrant families face in acculturating into the United States while preserving and transmitting traditional values and culture. This study aimed to emphasize the strengths inherent in this community through the traditional supports of kinship

connections and council of elders to guide families through conflicts. The findings will hopefully enhance social work practice by deepening cultural competency with this community in the service of building alliances and trust and most effectively working in partnership for the betterment of both individuals and the collective Somali Bantu refugee community as a whole. Extending beyond this group in Western Massachusetts and Connecticut, this study will suggest themes that apply to social work practice with a diverse range of cultures and communities.

Comparison of Parenting Styles of Somali Immigrants and Somalis in Africa

The comparison of parenting styles is divided into the following three topics: respect for elders, transitions from authoritarian to authoritative parenting, and parental loneliness and isolation. Consistent with literature about collectivist societies, Somali refugee parents in this study prioritized parental and elder respect for the sake of their children and the success of the collective group. Like many refugee and immigrant parents, they were dismayed by a pervasive sense of disrespect for elders in American society. Similar to findings from other studies of immigrants, parents in this study gradually acquiesced and adapted to an American lifestyle by ambivalently tolerating greater independence, individuality, and autonomy in their children than they would have in Africa. Many participants also confirmed loneliness and social isolation as common themes in the literature describing their greatest struggles.

Respect for Elders and Suppression of Individuality for the Sake of the Collective

The findings of this study substantiated previous literature showing divergent priorities and forms of expression of respect for elders and parental authority among

immigrant and non-immigrant children. Consistent with previous research comparing collectivist versus individualistic societies, the findings showed that Somali immigrant parents unanimously prioritized respect for elders as integral to preserving their cultural values, and one of the greatest differences between the lifestyles of Somali immigrant and non-Somali immigrant families in the U.S. (Rudy, et. al., 1999) One father expressed the theme of respect of elders as serving the collective good as well as a means of training his children to succeed within their lifestyle. Consistent with literature focusing on Chinese and African collectivist societies, Somali immigrants in this study confirmed that they were educated according to values linking deference to elders and suppression of self-interest, individuality and autonomy with success of the child and the collective (Chen, 2000, and Rudy et. al., 1999). One father interviewed suggested that he considered such values as leading to success. “Respecting any person is the way I’m training my children now; I want them to be successful.”

Transitions from Authoritarian to Authoritative Parenting Styles: Autonomy and Independence

Two fathers described distinctions between their parenting style and the way they were raised. In fact, they expressed that they actually changed their own parenting styles since living in the U.S. One had two teenage children born in Africa, and it may be inferred by his comments that he raised them differently from his American-born children. He stated, “Now, I have been living here for seven years, I know” referring to the norms of acceptable forms of parental discipline in the U.S. When asked if he had changed as a parent, he answered, “Yes, I have.” His comments suggested that his

experience living in the U.S. led him to a genuine transformation in his philosophy of education of children. He seemed to have internalized a more authoritative model of shaping children's behavior through respectful communication, not simply because he understood this as an American cultural norm. Thoughtful reasoning, reflection and observation led him to internalize it as his own, as concordant with his personal values.

Another father reflected on the traditional parenting culture in the context he grew up with, in which a father's use of a stick to discipline his children was commonplace. This interviewee described such a practice as normal, generally benign and distinct from physical abuse. At the same time that he minimized any seriously harmful outcome of such a practice, he emphatically stressed that this is not acceptable here and he would never discipline his own children in that way. These fathers' accounts suggest a combination of adapting to the host culture with slight ambivalence regarding their perception of their home culture. Reluctant to disparage their home culture, they rationalized the behavior as acceptable within its context and distinct from more extreme forms of corporeal punishment, while distancing themselves from the practice in their own parenting.

Weine's (2006) research of Bosnian immigrants showed similar themes of some parents adjusting their parenting style and adapting to an American lifestyle. Weine's study exemplified a common tension between the experience of parental anxiety over their loss of control and fear for their children's safety and the experience of gradually accepting greater autonomy in their children. Parents transitioning to more American parenting styles expressed, "Parents should trust kids more . . . and let kids choose their future" (Weine, 2006). Similarly, several Somali immigrant interviewees in this study

shared the sentiment of one mother regarding her children: “I am learning from them too.”

It seems that other participants maintained that they carried out the same parenting values and behaviors as they were raised with, yet they focused on the contrast in the ways non-immigrant American children behave compared with children in Africa. These differences centered on children’s expression of obedience and respect for parental authority. Parents may be less inclined to notice changes in themselves or they may prefer to link themselves with their family of origin rather than distance themselves, given their separation already. Stating that they sustained the same parenting style as their parents may serve to affirm their sense of success in fulfilling their obligations according to the values that were ingrained in them.

In the literature, some parents also revealed that they shifted their parenting style regarding issues of independence. Some Bosnian mothers (Weine, 2006) mentioned allowing their daughters greater autonomy than would have been typical in their countries of origin. Those studies demonstrated parents’ shifting attitudes in response to the host culture of adolescents. All the participants in this study expressed concerns about the pervasive influence of American culture on their children as a threat to the preservation of their heritage and to their children’s safety. Consistent with literature about immigrant parental fears for their children’s safety, including issues of drugs, delinquency, and sexual promiscuity, (Falicov, 2007 and Weine, 2006) some interviewees in this study mentioned their tendency to be highly protective. One mother explained, “Over here, we are more protective of our children. We are scared . . . because of . . . all the things we hear from the news. Maybe a stranger may take them

away!” She acknowledged that her distrust of American culture and her fears of people harming her children were augmented by her experience of not knowing her neighbors as she did in Somalia. She acknowledged that her neighbors in the U.S. were probably trustworthy, but she could not be sure. In contrast, she grew up in an environment where all her neighbors were like family.

The fundamental sense of trust of and affiliation with neighbors was among the greatest differences between Somali and American lifestyles, with ramifications for sustaining parental influence and control, and transmitting cultural values. Consistent with data on other immigrant groups, a Somali mother of adolescent boys recognized the tension she and her sons felt in terms of separation and individuation. She noted that they complained that she was overprotective and excessively restricting of their independence as they strived to fit in within American teen culture. East Indian teens in Baptiste’s (2005) research shared this common theme. “Children, especially young adults, often complain of feeling restrained in the range and kinds of acceptable/appropriate behaviors in which they can be involved as they separate and individuate from their families, without dishonoring them” (p. 357).

Loneliness and Isolation of Parents

Consistent with literature about the experience of Somali immigrant women in Australia, Europe and North America by Koshen (2007) and McMichael and Manderson (2004), loneliness and isolation were the greatest struggles for many Somali refugees and immigrants in this study, particularly women. One mother in this study echoed the same theme that emerged in Koshen’s (2007) research: the suffering of war and of refugee

camps was, in some ways, more familiar and bearable than the suffering of separation from family of origin and community. As McMichael and Manderson (2004) found social isolation to be the greatest challenge among Somali women in Australia, participants in this study emphasized their loneliness and lack of extended family and Somali neighbors as their greatest struggles as parents in America.

As noted in the findings section, there appeared to be a distinction in the nature of the ways that male and female respondents in this study described their sense of loss. The fathers tended to mention the loss of family and neighbors and the smaller Somali community as a pragmatic challenge. They expressed the difficulty of raising children while both parents were working or going to school, and their lack of transportation and funds and resources for child care. These difficulties and frustrations were augmented by the absence of practical support by family and neighbors, which they would have expected in Africa. In contrast, some of the mothers emphasized the emotional and psychological loss of support, particularly during childbirth and while caring for new babies as their greatest longing and sadness.

Acculturation into U.S. Society: Preservation of Tradition and Assimilation

Similar to literature about Muslim immigrant parents from South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, most of the parents in my sample felt that their children were greatly influenced by American culture through school and the media and were becoming more American than Somali (Ross-Sheriff et. al. 2007). Many participants mentioned their children's loss of the Somali language as a great disappointment exemplifying the challenges parents face in preserving Somali heritage. Unlike the experience of Somali

immigrant mothers in Koshen's research (2007), the parents in this study did not express a sense of diminished power in light of their children's command of English. This may be the case among two of the mothers in this study because they were fluent in English. Among those who were not, it may be that their children did speak Somali with them or it may simply be that these mothers did not share such an experience. However, mothers and fathers who themselves were fluent in English did mention their children's loss of Somali language as a potential rift between themselves and their children, augmenting a sense of disconnect and loneliness in accordance with experiences of other immigrant mothers in studies by Llerena-Quinn and Mirkin (2005). Among the families in which the parents spoke primarily Somali, and little or no English, particularly at home, they preserved their language in their communication with their children. It seemed to be more challenging to uphold the Somali language in households in which the mothers were more modern, western in their thinking and gender roles, educated, and English speaking.

Conflict Resolution and Roles of Extended Family and Council of Elders

Most participants' responses supported the literature regarding the role and function of extended family members and councils of elders in intra-familial conflict mediation in traditional African societies. Mkhize (1990) described a common, traditional African model of parents intervening in their children's marital difficulties. Most of the participants in this study spoke of this model as common in their homelands of Somalia and Kenya. All interviewees discussed the role and function of the Council of Elders in their current communities in the U.S. as consistent with the literature's

description of such councils in Africa (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). The respondents' description of the Council of Elders also confirmed McMichael and Manderson's (2004) account of the presence of such Councils throughout Somali immigrant communities.

However, whereas Mkhize (1990) noted the subordinate role of women in traditional African society limiting their power to challenge their husbands, my interviewees did not suggest that Somali Bantu wives were forbidden from communicating anger or marital dissatisfaction to their husbands, parents, or Council of Elders. They described a process where elders in the U.S. carefully listened to the perspectives of both the husband and wife in order to assess the conflict. This is consistent with Sharon & Schwartzman's (1998) description of the *shmaglotz* in Ethiopia. "The *shmaglotz*' refers to a group of elders who served to negotiate marital disputes (as well as conflicts beyond the immediate family) through careful investigation of the perspectives of all parties, with the aim of sustaining harmony within the marriage. All the participants confirmed the function of the local council of elders in the U.S. as consistent with the traditional model of Ethiopian family and couple mediation, designed to offer both parties the chance to express their perspectives in the service of achieving compromise and harmony within the family.

Contrasting Conceptions of and Responses to Domestic Abuse

Questions about familial conflict resolution and gender role changes accompanying resettlement, as well as inquiries about what those serving their community needed to understand about Somali culture led some male respondents to

mention the topic of domestic abuse. These men reacted strongly to incidents of Somali refugee women in the Springfield area calling 911 for help with marital problems and, with a degree of indignant defensiveness, eagerly recounted a common perspective of Somali refugee men. They expressed dismay about police involvement in such matters, preferring the Council to resolve them instead. For some, this represented the area of greatest tension in adapting to American society: a combination of corruption of the traditional hierarchy of power between husbands and wives and an involvement of outsiders into personal family matters. Some of the men emphatically expressed strong disapproval of Somali women betraying their husbands, calling on the police to intervene, and “exiling the husbands from the home.” The interviewees emphasized that this behavior of women brings a sense of shame to their community, which may be exacerbated by the experience of the Somali Bantu as outsiders in the U.S. and as oppressed minorities in Africa.

It may also reflect the fundamental value of familial harmony as reverberating to the larger community and, conversely, family conflict threatening the stability of the community. As Mkhize (1990) connected family strife with vulnerability to enemy attack of the community, the participants in my study may have associated weakened male authority within a family with weakness of the Somali immigrant community on a macro scale. Participants suggested that such a challenge to male authority by women and, one may infer, by the police, disrupted and weakened not only that particular family, but the stability of the Somali refugee community at large. Given the history of the Somali Bantu as an oppressed minority having suffered atrocities in Somalia and in neighboring refugee camps, where there was no semblance of law and order amidst the

chaos of civil war and widespread brutality, police intervention to remove a man from the home in the U.S. may trigger memories of violence in Africa.

Somali Immigrant Distrust of American Models of Therapy and Mediation and Medical Care

As discussed in the literature review, traditional Ethiopian mediation included individual and joint sessions offering both partners the opportunity to express their perspectives of the problems, their future expectations and possibilities for compromise (Sharon & Schwartzman, 1998). All participants in this study addressing the question of conflict resolution confirmed such models in Africa and within their communities in the U.S. Respondents described the same process at play in their home communities as the literature (Mkhize, 1990). Conflict resolution involved parents of both the husband and wife intervening to listen to both parties express their grievances with the goal of finding a middle ground towards reconciliation. The participants in this study lacked extended family in the U.S. to function in this role. Instead, interviewees confirmed accounts in the literature of viable councils of elders established within Somali immigrant communities in various western countries to respond to familial conflict associated with resettlement (McMichael and Manderson, 2004).

An analysis of the distinctions between the traditional Somali models and American models highlights opposing orientations. Whereas, in Western culture, a therapist or judge is considered most effective when he or she is distant, removed, and thus impartial and unbiased, in Somali culture, the most effective means of ensuring the desired peaceful resolution of marital conflict is through mediators who are closest to the couple. As one respondent explained,

If a couple argues, they try to solve it on their own but very often, the culture is, they will involve the parents from both sides. The in-laws come and mediate and 95% of the time, they succeed because they are fair. If the in-laws are not there, then it goes to the next of kin: and then the sub-clan elders.

He continued, “Trust is more (assured) on to a relative (than an outsider).”

This orientation reveals a sense of distrust of outsiders to intimately understand and support families, which is consistent with literature showing a preference among immigrants for service providers sharing the same culture (Legault, 1997). As this same participant responded to the question of what helping professionals need to know about the Somali Bantu refugee experience to best serve the community, he emphasized the need to educate oneself. “They need to be culturally sensitive and know the culture and norms. Then, they develop their trust.”

Somali Immigrant Distrust of American Models of Medical Care

One participant confirmed the literature expressing themes of Somali immigrant women’s distrust of medical providers and hospitals and challenges regarding medical care. Consistent with research about Somali immigrant women in Australia and their negative experience with western medical providers, one woman in this study expressed similar struggles with medical care in the U.S. (Manderson and Allotey, 2003).

Manderson and Allotey’s research focused on themes of doctors’ lack of cultural competency, specifically in terms of some doctors’ false presumptions about their patients, minimization or invalidation of their medical concerns, and insensitivity to cultural context.

The Somali immigrant woman in this study described an invalidating and dismissive reaction on the part of a doctor regarding her medical concern which was

comparable to findings in Manderson's and Allotey's (2003) study. Complaining at the hospital of symptoms of a prolonged, excruciating spinal headache following childbirth, and suspecting that she suffered from a reaction to an epidural during labor, she was met with dismissive invalidation. A doctor brushed aside and minimized her pain, neglecting to appreciate a link with the epidural, the validity of her pain, the possibility of postpartum depression, and the stress of undergoing a procedure that, from the context of Somali experience, is considered a death sentence. While she acknowledged that the staff was likely well-meaning, she recalled a frightening, alienating experience: "The hospital environment, you feel is not friendly, even though it might be. But you worry about the c-section . . . (In Somalia), having a c-section is deadly because the mom or baby dies."

Sensitivity to such perceptions of c-sections and to the foreign and isolating experience of giving birth in the hospital might bridge an alliance with Somali immigrant women to better support them. At the same time, attending to, valuing and validating the experience of the patient would contribute to improved relationships between providers and patients and positive experiences of health care in the U.S.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study's small sample size of nine participants limited its generalizability. A larger number of participants would be recommended to potentially offer a wider range of responses and be more representative of the Somali immigrant population of Western Massachusetts, Connecticut, and beyond this region. It would be interesting to include children of Somali immigrant parents in the sample in order to explore their perceptions

of themselves and their families in terms of acculturation and preservation of tradition. Interviewing adolescents would likely generate themes of individuation, separation, and autonomy versus obligation and familial loyalty from their own perspectives, and not only from their parents' points of view. It would also be illuminating to do a longitudinal study that compared the adaptations of family members to life in the U.S. over time and across generations.

As discussed earlier, the participation of women in the study was limited by the lack of English proficiency among some women and their preoccupation with childcare during the interviews conducted at home. If more women had been interviewed separately from their husbands and children, with an impartial interpreter, perhaps a woman herself, then responses might have been more open, honest, and reflective of the experience of mothers. Some women may have been inhibited by speaking in the presence of men and amidst the distractions of children. This might explain why their answers to questions were often brief and generally concordant with their husbands' responses.

This study touched only briefly on issues of racism and discrimination in the context of children's identity as Somali versus American. Questions focusing on race might generate greater awareness about the degree to which Somali immigrant families feel marginalized from and integrated within American society. Some respondents mentioned their adjustment to American racism as a new experience. They mentioned being targets of racist comments and assumptions linking them with both African Americans and Muslim terrorists. Exploring connections between Somali immigrant families and other Muslim immigrant groups residing in the vicinity and affiliated with

the same Islamic centers might have shown the ways that different immigrant communities serve as supports and resources for one another based on shared experiences, or, in contrast, feel separate from one another. It would also have been interesting to compare children who assimilated more with those who integrated or preserved their Somali identity more, through an analysis of factors contributing to different acculturative preferences and experiences. Questions might focus on age and gender of children to discern patterns and themes to explain why some children might be more conservative and traditional while others might minimize their Somali identity in favor of being more American.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for clinical social work practice. Service providers must learn to skillfully adapt to the needs of this population with cultural sensitivity and competency. A deeper understanding of the experience, challenges, strengths, and values of Somali refugee families will allow school counselors, educators, therapists, and medical professionals to more effectively empower and support this community of children and families. Earning the trust of Somali parents is fundamental to successfully working with their children. Given their history as a vulnerable, oppressed minority in Africa and as outsiders in the United States, Somali refugee parents, particularly from the Bantu clan, may tend towards skepticism of outside intervention. It is essential to recognize the experience of loss of extended family and neighbors, common to many Somali immigrant parents, and to understand the impact of this absence and of social isolation on family life.

It is important to appreciate the tension Somali refugee parents may feel between the pull of their home and host culture. Couples may struggle in adapting to gender role changes, weakening male authority and impacting their marital relationships. Parents may struggle with reconciling a distancing in their children from their traditions and heritage. The less immigrant children struggle with cultural discontinuity, the more secure they may be in their social identity and feel a sense of belonging within the larger American society. This may correspond with a sense of peace in integrating both parts of their identities. Understanding and validating the inherent strengths of Somali family support networks and community support systems rooted in councils of elders helps to bridge the work of professionals with traditional models of support. Further, the more social workers and other service providers value and support traditional cultural continuity in Somali refugee and immigrant children and families, the more likely they will build an alliance of trust and empowerment.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

November 29, 2009

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Judy Wolf and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study on Somali refugee parents and the ways that they experience changes in family life and the challenges of keeping their traditional culture and values while raising children in the United States. Data obtained in this study will be used in my master's thesis and possible future presentations and publications.

My interest in this topic resulted from my experience last year, teaching a class at Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts in conjunction with Mohamud Mohamed, to prepare Somali Bantu immigrants to take the U.S. citizenship test. It was an honor and inspiration to work with some members of the Somali Bantu community. Mr. Mohamud and Mr. Abdulkadir Yunye, chairman of the Somali Bantu Organization of Springfield, are assisting me in my research.

Your participation in this study is requested because you are a Somali refugee parent. If you are interested in participating in this study, you must understand and speak English and have one or more children under the age of 18. If you choose to participate, I will interview you about your experience being a parent here, how your family may have changed since moving to the United States, how raising a child here is different from in Somalia, and how you pass along your traditions, religion, culture, and values to your children. I will also ask you how you solve problems that may come up in the family, and what American social service professionals need to know to better serve this community. I will ask you to provide information about yourself such as your age, the number and ages of your children, who lives in your household, and how long you have lived in the United States. The interview will be conducted in person, will be tape-recorded, and will last about one hour.

The risk of participating in this study may be that some questions may remind you of difficulties or problems in your family, loss, or difficult memories from life in Africa. I will provide a list of local therapy resources that you may refer to if you experience emotional distress as a result of participation in this study.

The benefits of participating in this study are that you have the chance to share your stories and help others understand some of the issues of Somali refugee families. Your stories will help medical and mental health providers and teachers to better understand the background, values, challenges, and strengths of the Somali refugee community.

Your participation in this study is confidential and I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name in my writing. In addition, I will lock all written material and audiotapes in a secure location according to federal regulations. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any interview questions and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by indicating in writing that you are no longer interested in participating. If you withdraw from the study, all materials related to you will be destroyed immediately. You have until March 15, 2010 to withdraw from the study.

If you have any questions, you can contact me. If you have any concerns, you may also contact the chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee (HSR) at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Signature

Date:

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

- When did you arrive in the United States?
- Is your home located in an area where other Somalis reside?
- How many children do you have in the United States?
- Number of boys:
- Ages of boys:
- Number of girls:
- Ages of girls:

Comparison of Parenting Styles between Somali Immigrants and Somalis in Africa

- Tell me about the ways you parent your children here in the U.S.
- How is this different from or similar to the way you were raised?

Comparison between Somali family systems and family values with those typical of western society in the U.S.

- Tell me about ways that you behave differently and have different values as a parent from parents who were born here in the U.S.
- Are the values of your family and the roles family members play in your family different from typical American families? How?
- Have roles changed in your family for children and parents and husbands and wives since resettlement?

Acculturation into U.S. society and the preservation and transmission of traditional family values and culture

- Is it important to you to pass along cultural values, rituals, traditions and language of your family, clan, and of Islam to your children?
- If so, how, in particular, do you do this?
- Do you feel that your children are more Somali Bantu, more American, or a balance integrating both? In what ways?

Adjustment to changes in family systems

- Were you raised with a large extended family?
- Do you have extended family living in your household or your neighborhood here?
- If you grew up surrounded by extended family but do not have that here, how does this change affect you?

Conflict resolution within families

- How do you resolve conflicts that may arise in relationships between husband and wife and parent and child?

The efficacy and role the Council of Elders versus western social service systems in supporting families

- Does the Council of Elders mediate conflict and support Somali families in your community?
- If so, in what ways, in particular, have you seen or experienced intervention by the Council of Elders?

Relevance of sharing stories and experience of parenting in transition

What do American non-African helping professionals need to know about Somali Bantu culture and the refugee experience to best serve the community?

- How can social workers, school personnel, and other service professionals empower you in sustaining cultural continuity and parenting successfully?

Appendix C

Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

SMITH COLLEGE
**School for
Social Work**
January 15, 2010

Judith Wolf

Dear Judith,

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

Your second set of revisions has been reviewed and all is now complete. We are glad to give final approval to this most interesting study. If you do end up making any changes in your Interview Guide, please send us the new guide for our review.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. It is really great that you have the opportunity to study this very interesting group.

Sincerely,
Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee
CC: Jean LaTerz, Research Advisor